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THE MISSIONARIES WERE EARTH'S LAST HOPE—
BUT NO ONE HAD EVER TAUGHT THEM HOW
TO TELL A FRIENDLY ALIEN FROM AN ENEMY...!

SURVIVOR

A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL BY

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

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CHAPTER ONE

Alanna

I didn't know enough to appreciate my foster father the way I should have when we met back on Earth. That was when I was about fifteen and his Missionaries caught me stealing from their cornfield. They shot me, would have killed me, but he stopped them. Then he carried me back to his house, got a doctor to tend my wound, and announced that he and his wife were adopting me. Just like that. I heard the doctor try to talk him out of it when they both thought I was unconscious.

"You could be making a mistake, Jules. She's not the harmless young girl she appears to be. And she'll never replace your children."

"My children are dead," said my foster father quietly. "I've accepted that. I wouldn't expect her or anyone else to replace them."

The doctor was silent for a moment. Then he sighed. "Well, at least she can talk."

"Of course she can talk! She *is* human, Bart, wild or not."

"Yes…physically anyway. Some of them can't do much more than grunt, you know. They've either forgotten speech, or they never learned it. As wild humans, they spend their lives either hunting or being hunted. By the time they're this girl's age, they're more wild than human."

"This one's a future Missionary," said my foster father. "She'll learn. She'll become one of us."

"Maybe." The doctor sounded doubtful. "If the people let her, and if she really wants to. But I think all she'll learn for quite a while is how to pretend to be one of us. Don't expect more than that."

And my foster father didn't at first. I don't think he had even before the doctor warned him. All he asked of me was that I learn to put on a good act when I was with people other than him and his wife

Neila. That would protect me from the less tolerant of his Missionaries. Perhaps during that early period, he was too tolerant himself, though, too willing to let me stand apart from his people as I was naturally inclined to do. Perhaps there was a time when I could have become a Missionary if he had insisted, pushed me. But as it happened, it was best for him, for his people, and especially for me, that he did not insist. Best that when we left Earth and settled on our new world, I became something else entirely.

Two days after Alanna Verrick was rescued from her Tehkohn captors, the sharp edge of her pain began to wear away. She could think again. She could look at her situation clearly and realize how much trouble she was in.

Her rescuers, complacent and overconfident after their victorious raid, were also in trouble but they did not know it. In fact, their ignorance was one of Alanna's problems. But she had another more immediate problem. In a very short time, she was going to have to convince her rescuers that they had not made a mistake in setting her free.

For now, though, she followed them silently as she had for the past two days while they herded their own Tehkohn prisoners down from the mountains. They had already reached the foothills and Alanna could look down from the trail into the valley's thick covering of yellow-green meklah trees. For the first time in nearly eight hundred days—two local years—she saw the planet's only settlement of Earth humans. The Mission colony that had once been her home. Like her, it had changed.

The Missionaries had transformed their settlement from a scattered collection of cabins almost hidden by the surrounding trees to a solidly stockaded town—a fortress that apparently provided them with the dangerous illusion of security.

Alanna looked around for some sign of the Garkohn town. Since the Garkohn, native allies of the Missionaries, chose to live underground, a sign of their town would be a small hill somewhere along the eastern side of the valley—the far side. But there were many such hills, all natural-looking, all identically covered with meklah trees and shrubs. The Garkohn knew that real security began with adequate camouflage. But then, the Missionaries considered this world's version of even adequate camouflage to be beyond their reach. The expertise of the natives intimidated them.

Thus, only the Missionary fortress stood in plain view, beckoning unwittingly to the Tehkohn—inviting them to steal in and butcher everyone without even the inconvenience of a battle. And, Alanna guessed, after the defeat that the Tehkohn had just suffered, they

would be strongly motivated to do just that.

Alanna looked back at the Tehkohn prisoners. They walked together in a group completely surrounded by their Garkohn and Missionary captors. She noticed that one of the prisoners, the big blue one, was watching her. This startled her because until now, he had been very careful to pay no attention to her at all. She turned away quickly.

Her foster father, Jules Verrick, was walking beside her. He noticed the gesture and naturally misinterpreted it.

"Don't worry," he said. "They're well guarded. For once, they're the prisoners instead of us."

Silently, Alanna found fault with the inclusive "us." She alone had been a prisoner of the Tehkohn. Others, Garkohn and Missionary, had been captured with her, but they were dead. Only Alanna had managed to live beyond the first few days of her captivity. Only she had survived to be rescued.

Jules spoke again gently. "You'll feel better when we get home and those creatures are locked up out of your sight."

She nodded meaninglessly, wondering whether he really thought that after two years among the Tehkohn, she could still be upset by the sight of them. She looked out over the valley again. The sight of the defenseless Missionary fortress had far more power to upset her. In the long run, the Missionaries were in greater danger than she was.

She glanced at the prisoners again, seeing them in a different way now—seeing them as living shields for the Missionaries.

"How many of the prisoners are yours, Jules?" she asked. He was the Missionary leader and would know exactly.

"Five hunters," he answered, "and one of the blue-green types."

"A judge," said Alanna. "Higher than a hunter among the Tehkohn."

"Yes, and…all the farmers are ours." He sounded a little ashamed of this last. As far as Alanna was concerned, he had reason to be. Farmers and artisans were nonfighters. Capturing them was no achievement. The Garkohn had taken none of them. The Garkohn had hunters, judges, and one other. These were the prisoners who would have been most useful to the Missionaries. Prisoners whom the Tehkohn could ill afford to lose, prisoners whom the Missionaries could shield themselves behind and negotiate through. The Missionaries could negotiate a peace now that all Tehkohn would respect if Jules could only speak privately with the prisoners who belonged to the Garkohn. Such a peace had to be arranged if the Missionaries were to survive. And Alanna had to arrange it somehow. That was the responsibility she had assigned herself. It was not a responsibility she wanted. It would center the attention of three

warring peoples on her. If she made a mistake, one of the groups would surely kill her. But she was the only person with the knowledge, and possibly the leverage, to manage it. And she owed her foster parents a debt. Years before, they had saved her. Now she would try to save them, and save their Mission, which meant so much to them. She had to try.

"Lanna?"

Alanna looked at her foster father knowing from his apologetic tone that she would probably not like what he had to say.

"Natahk has been wanting to talk to you—ask you a few questions about your stay with the Tehkohn."

Alanna turned away from him, striving to conceal her fear and anger. Here was the personal trouble she had been anticipating. Natahk was the Garkohn leader, their First Hunter. She could show fear at having to see him, but she had to be careful not to show her anger. "I guess I should have expected that," she said.

Jules put an arm around her. "Look," he said, "I know how you must feel about the natives—any natives—after what you've been through. If you think talking to Natahk will be too much for you right now, I'll tell him you can't…"

"No," she said. "It's all right, Jules. I'll see him."

He looked at her with concern. "You're frightened," he said, "and sick. You've been like a sleepwalker these past two days. I shouldn't have bothered you with this. I'm going to tell him to wait."

Tempted to let him go ahead, she kept silent for a long moment. She did not want to talk to anyone about her experiences with the Tehkohn, did not want to talk to a Garkohn about anything at all. She had no doubt that the Garkohn were responsible for involving the Missionaries in this raid that had so endangered them—just as two years before, the Garkohn had made the Missionaries vulnerable by using their settlement as a base from which to raid the Tehkohn. The valley natives were not the friends the Missionaries thought them to be. Alanna had learned much about them from their Tehkohn enemies. And she had seen some of what she had learned proven in the raid just past.

The thought of having to go to Natahk now and feign ignorance and friendship sickened her. But for that reason more than any other, she had to do it. She had to let him ask her in carefully veiled words where her loyalties were. What had two years among his enemies done to her? Had he freed a Missionary prisoner, or a Tehkohn spy?

"I'm well enough, Jules," she said finally. "I'll talk to him."

Jules shrugged. "All right, girl. It's your decision."

After perhaps another hour of walking, Jules and Natahk called the noon rest stop. Alanna sought out Natahk at once.

The Garkohn leader was a tall stocky humanoid who easily matched Alanna's own unusual height—nearly two meters. His height and his deeper-than-usual green coloring showed that although he was of the hunter clan, he had had a judge ancestor or two. It was only within Natahk's own lifetime that the last of the Garkohn judges had been killed, victims of interclan fighting with the more numerous hunters.

Natahk's eyes were narrowed by a Kohn version of the epicanthic fold. His fur grew longer and thicker on his head and around his neck and shoulders, forming a kind of mane. Even his face was furred all over, though the fur was shorter. But the face was long and flat and his body and limbs were humanly proportioned. He was not apelike. The Missionaries saw him and his people as strangely colored, furred caricatures of human beings.

The Missionaries had made a religion of maintaining and spreading their own version of humanity—a religion that had helped them to preserve that humanity back on Earth. Now, though, their religion had gotten in their way. It had helped them to justify their belief that the Kohn were lower creatures—higher than apes, but lower than true humans who had been made in the image of God. The trouble was, the Missionaries had known such "intelligent animals" before. Missionary prejudices were long established and, as far as Alanna was concerned, dangerous. If she had accepted them herself, the Tehkohn would have rid her of them. The natives were human enough. And they were powerful humans.

Their greatest weapon was the fur that the Missionaries condemned them for. It was unlike any fur that the Missionaries had known back on Earth—fine thick alive stuff that changed color and seemed to change texture. It permitted the natives to blend invisibly into their surroundings whenever they wished. It could permit the Tehkohn to camouflage themselves as they scaled the Missionaries' wall. It could permit them to murder half the colony before anyone noticed them.

Alanna found Natahk seated on the ground, his back against a tree. She noticed that he had moved as far from the Tehkohn prisoners as he could get without leaving the group entirely. Many of the prisoners were bluer than he was and would have outranked him had they been Garkohn. As the bluest of the Garkohn, he must have felt that they detracted from his impressiveness. And they did, even in Alanna's eyes. She smiled at the thought of his discomfort as she approached him.

"Natahk," she greeted quietly as she sat down opposite him.

He startled her by drawing his lipless mouth into a smile. "Alanna." It was something he had copied from the Missionaries, not a

Kohn expression. And he did it badly. He made it an expression of condescension, of contempt, rather than one of friendliness.

"Jules said you had questions." Alanna concentrated on speaking English. She did not attempt to speak Garkohn, knowing how easy it would be for her to offend Natahk by slipping into the more familiar Tehkohn dialect.

"I have several questions," said Natahk. "But first, I want to tell you that I know of your loss, and that I'm sorry."

Alanna froze, stared at him in disbelief. Suddenly, she was fighting to maintain her self-control. But the wound the Garkohn had prodded was too raw, too new. How could he know? How could he?

Natahk went on. "We tried hard to prevent your daughter's death. I'm sorry we failed."

Alanna felt her control cracking, falling away. Abruptly, she folded forward and down as though in physical pain so that her face was hidden by the black veil of her hair. She made no sound. Her grief was not something to share with the Garkohn liar, the Garkohn murderer! What tricks had he used to make Jules join him in raiding the Tehkohn—join him indirectly in the murder of her child?

Still silent, unmoving, Alanna decided that Natahk would die. No matter what else happened, no matter what other revenge the Tehkohn managed to take, this Garkohn would die.

She held her position of distress several seconds longer than necessary so that when she rose, the last signs of anguish were gone from her face. Replacing them was cold hatred.

"We did not kill your child," said Natahk. "You know that."

She said nothing, wondered again how Natahk could possibly have known that one of the children killed in the raid had been hers. As though to draw away from its pain, her mind worried at the question.

Her daughter Tien had not been the bright golden-green of most Kohn infants. But the child's darker strangely shaded green was not beyond the Kohn spectrum—especially not beyond the Tehkohn spectrum. It might have meant no more than that Tien was destined for higher rank than the children who had more yellow in their coloring. And Tien had looked Tehkohn—almost. Her eyes were rounder than Kohn eyes, and her hands and feet promised to be too large, too long for a Kohn. Small things, especially in such a young child. Natahk's people would almost have had to be looking for such a child. And even having found Tien, they could not have been sure. Natahk could not have been sure…

Alanna looked at him with Tehkohn-trained eyes. At once, she detected the slight brightening of his coloring—lighter toward white. That was the only sign he gave of his triumph, his success at tricking

her into confirming his suspicions. And he was not used to Missionaries reading such small signs. He seemed to think he was still adequately maintaining his facade of solemnity and concern. He had tricked her so easily. Now he sat waiting to do it again.

"Do you know how my daughter died?" she asked. She kept her voice low and calm.

"I was told that a Tehkohn huntress killed her to keep her from being taken by my hunters."

"So." She switched abruptly to Tehkohn, allowing her anger to show. It made no difference now. The Garkohn was already well aware of which side she had to be on. "One of your hunters fed her from his bag of meklah poison while several Tehkohn were forced to watch. He did it so that he could enjoy their reactions; I was there. It is only because the Tehkohn broke ranks so quickly to tear him apart that your hunters had no time to notice my reaction. By the time your hunters had killed some of the Tehkohn and restored order, a Tehkohn huntress had killed my child." Alanna stared at him in silence for a moment, then continued bitterly. "Do you know that I understand what she did, First Hunter? Do you know that I am grateful to her for saving my child from the life that meklah addiction would have condemned her to—the life of a Garkohn!" She made the name an obscenity.

But she was lying. Tien's life meant more to her than any tribal feud, more than any personal prejudice. She would rather have had her daughter alive even addicted to meklah, and thus confined to the valley. But Natahk did not know that. He would believe her, and he would know that he could never again use Tien's death as a tool to pry information from her. That was all Alanna wanted.

She started to rise to leave him and he caught her arm in a thick, powerful, short-fingered hand. His grip was loose, however, only warning.

"I'm not finished, Alanna."

She looked at his hand, then at him. "The Missionaries may not be able to hear us at this distance, Natahk, but they can see us well enough."

He released her arm and again she started to leave.

"Sit still!"

She was stopped by his tone rather than his words. She looked at him and saw that his coloring had taken on more yellow with his anger. He spoke again.

"You will talk to me now, or I will have my hunters take you from the Mission settlement and bring you to me later."

Slowly, stunned, she sat back down. He meant it. She was alerted now; he would not deceive her again. But he had already goaded her

into admitting that she was his enemy, and he would treat her as an enemy. He knew the Missionaries well enough to realize that she could not afford to have them learn that she had accepted a Tehkohn man, borne a "subhuman" child. Exodus 22:19: "Whosoever lieth with a beast shall surely be put to death." Such a sin could turn even Jules and Neila Verrick against her. Thus, Natahk felt free to threaten her, and to carry out his threat if she made it necessary. She would be in no position to complain.

"So," he said softly. "You understand." And he leaned back, looked at her curiously, appraisingly, letting her know the subject of his next words before he spoke them. Her husband…

"I try to imagine what kind of Tehkohn man would accept you in a liaison," he said. "And how such a man might feel when he learned that you carried his child and the liaison had become a marriage. Which clan does your husband belong to?"

"He's a judge." She was careful to say the words with the proper amount of pride and disdain. Judges were, among other things, lawgivers, advisers to rulers, and sometimes, rulers themselves. The judge blue-green could have accounted for the lack of yellow in Tien's coloring. It did not, but it could have.

"A judge." Natahk seemed to believe her. "We have captured four judges, we lowly hunters. Four judges and a Hao!" He shimmered, gleefully luminescent, and turned to look at the prisoners. Most of them were half covered with a red paint made especially for shaming enemies, criminals, and prisoners of war. With prisoners, it also served to neutralize their camouflage ability. No red-painted captive, even if he escaped his captors, could hope simply to fade away into the woods. Red was too rare a color aboveground in both the mountains and the valley. No matter how well the unpainted parts of a prisoner's body blended with his background, the red blazed forth to reveal him.

"I wonder," said Natahk, "whether we have captured your husband."

"You haven't," she said shortly. Another lie—but this time, perhaps only half a lie.

"So? But I've watched you, Alanna. The way you look at the prisoners. The way you avoid looking at the prisoners. Your face shows more than fear and painful memories. Yes, I think we've captured him—or driven him into the hands of the Missionaries. Is he their one crippled judge?"

She realized peripherally that the Missionaries' lone judge must have been the one with the broken arm and the long red gash in his forehead.

"Which is it?" asked Natahk.

Alanna said nothing.

"If you have feeling for the man who fathered your child, you'll tell me. If he belongs to the Missionaries, I can speak to Verrick, perhaps make a trade. He would be safer in my hands. I know better than to kill my prisoners. The Missionaries may not." He paused, trying to read her carefully expressionless face, then went on. "In the southern end of this valley, there is another Garkohn town."

"A town of farmers," said Alanna. "I know."

"Mostly farmers, yes, and some hunters to defend against animals and raiders, and to get meat. I'm First among them too. I could make a place there for you and your husband to resume your lives together."

Alanna smiled grimly. "My husband is not a captive, hunter."

He looked doubtful. "If you are telling the truth, you may be less fortunate than you think. You may have no other chance for reunion with him."

"Reunited to live as Garkohn, our loyalties ensured by the meklah?"

"That is our way, Alanna."

"And I have said what I thought of that 'way.'"

"Oh yes. Death would be preferable." He rose to his feet. "Stand up."

She obeyed slowly, suspiciously, taking real comfort in the fact that she was still within sight of the Missionaries.

"Walk with me. I have something to show you."

She stayed where she was. Now she had reason for her fear. "Then bring it to me, Natahk."

He laid a hand on her shoulder. The companionable gesture had a meaning all its own among the Kohn. It was as much a threat as a raised club. "You will come with me now or later," he said. "It makes no difference."

She looked around desperately, not knowing what to do. Whatever he had in mind for her would no doubt be worse if she made him wait and abduct her. She could not call on the Missionaries for help. And the other who had an interest in her welfare, her husband, was in no position to help her. He should not have been a captive, probably would not be one long, but he was one now, and that meant he had problems of his own.

She told herself that Natahk would not dare do her any real harm. Hurting her would lose him the friendship of the Missionaries, and for some reason he had gone to great trouble to maintain that friendship. Surely whatever satisfaction he might get from hurting her was not worth its loss. She followed him, holding that thought.

Natahk led her by the arm as though he was afraid she might suddenly change her mind and try to go back. When she saw the heavily laden meklah tree that he was leading her toward, she did

exactly that. But by then, it was too late.

She panicked, twisted away from him, ran a few steps. She was quick—easily quicker than most hunters, she knew. But Natahk was not an ordinary hunter. He caught her arm and she kicked at him. But she was off balance. He dodged easily. He jerked her to him, twisted her arm behind her. His other arm clamped across her throat painfully, cutting off her breath.

"You're being foolish, Alanna," he said quietly. "What would you have done if you had managed to break away? Where would you go to escape me?"

She could not answer. She stood bent slightly backward against him by the pressure of his arm across her throat.

He pushed and guided her the rest of the way toward the tree, then spoke quietly into her ear. "What I intend to show you is a truth about yourself. I cannot believe that a Missionary can become Tehkohn in only two years. Now many Tehkohn would truly prefer death to the meklah. I know because I have watched them starve themselves to death when they realize that they cannot escape—that death is the only alternative to becoming Garkohn. But I have never seen Missionaries deliberately kill themselves for any reason." He moved his arm from her throat and suddenly she could breathe again. As she stood gasping, she felt his hand caress her throat, now obscenely gentle. "Pick a meklah fruit and eat it, Alanna, or I will kill you."

She started to speak but he raised his hand to touch her mouth.

"Make no pleas and no outcry. Do exactly as I say, and you will live. Do anything else, and you will die. Now. Pick the fruit."

One small fruit. Only one. It seemed so harmless. Yet the Tehkohn had warned her, She had been addicted once. Even one fruit would mean readdiction.

She had watched a room full of people, Missionary and Garkohn, die very slowly in meklah withdrawal. She had not been able to watch too carefully because she had been in withdrawal herself. For days, she had been near death. She could no longer remember all that had happened to her during that time, but she remembered the pain.

Her hand seemed to reach up against her will to pick a ripe yellow fruit.

She looked at the fruit and wondered whether it would kill her this time the way it had killed the others. Because she would have to withdraw again. She would have no choice.

She bit into the fruit, found it firm and sweet, delicious against all reason. No wonder the Missionaries had welcomed it so warmly when the Garkohn introduced them to it. It had been one of the first gifts of the Garkohn to the new colonists three years before. The Mission

doctor had tested it and declared it safe to eat. No one had thought that it might not be safe to stop eating.

She finished the fruit and the Garkohn released her. She did not move, did not even turn to look at him. “When the Tehkohn come to kill you, Natahk, I hope they do it slowly. I hope they take away your meklah and let me watch.”

“So?” He smiled again grotesquely. “You should use your time thinking of things that are possible. Your husband, for instance, freed and cleansed of the red stigma.”

She ignored him, started to walk back to where the raiding party rested. He moved after her quickly.

“Why do you continually force me to threaten you?”

“What more do you think your threats can do?” Her voice was flat, dead. “I’ve told you that you don’t have my husband. You can’t force me to point out someone who isn’t a captive. If you try, I’ll choose one of your judges and claim him to please you. And you will be pleased with a lie.”

She walked faster and left him behind. He did not call her again. She skirted widely around the prisoners and returned to the Missionaries, who were just preparing to resume their homeward march.

CHAPTER TWO

Alanna

We were busy cannibalizing the ship, clearing land, and building our cabins when I decided to learn the Garkohn language. It bothered me, frightened me to live among people I couldn't understand—especially since they were learning to understand us so quickly. To the disgust of several Missionaries, Jules not only agreed with me, but he lessened my share of the work so that I would have time to learn.

Next, I had to find a teacher. I asked around. Missionaries were often approached by Garkohn who had been ordered by their leader Natahk to learn English. Most Missionaries did not want to learn the Garkohn language, but sometimes they condescended to teach English. Industriously, the Garkohn learned. Now, I was told that there was a persistent huntress who had been living in the woods near our settlement for days trying to get someone to teach her. A Missionary man pointed her out to me.

She was sitting on the thick exposed root of a meklah tree. Such trees spread some of their roots vinelike over the ground until they found open sunlight. Then they anchored themselves to the ground and began growing into new trees—or new extensions of old trees. Aboveground, much of the valley was covered with roots as thick as the bodies of two or three men. Missionaries had blasted loose many of them. The Garkohn had watched the blasting with fascination.

Now though, the Garkohn woman I wanted to talk with was leaning back watching nothing at all. The coloring of her legs and lower torso blended into the rich yellow-brown of the wood she was sitting on so that she appeared to be growing out of it. Unconscious camouflage. Already we Missionaries had seen it too often to be surprised by it.

I walked over to the woman and when she saw me she stood up,

her coloring darkening to its normal deep green. She was tall—only half a head shorter than I was—and even then I knew that because of her coloring she ranked high among her people. Her body was straight and stocky and her eyes were wary. She examined me as closely as I was examining her.

"Alanna," I said, raising my hand to my chest. "*Toh* Alanna. *Ehtoh kai*?" I had learned that much just from living around Garkohn for two of Jules's thirty-day months. On a world without a moon, Jules had decided to stay with thirty and thirty-one-day months at least for a while.

"Ah," the woman said. "*Toh* Gehl." She was silent for a moment, then said my name. "Ah-la-na?"

It was a start. I took her arm and sat down, pulling her down beside me. The Garkohn seemed always to be touching each other so I did not expect her to be offended. I was surprised, though, at the hardness of her muscle beneath her soft fur.

She caught my hand as I released her and looked at it, examined it really, seeing how much longer my fingers were than her own, bending my fingers at the joints, testing the strength of my fingernails. She brushed a furry finger over the short sparse hairs that grew out of the back of my hand.

Then she held my open hand flat between her own two and shook it once. "*Tahncheah*," she said. Then she repeated it more slowly. "*Tahn*." She grasped my fingers alone. "*Tahn*." And she made a tight fist of my hand. "*Cheah*." She let go of me for a moment and struck her open palm with a closed fist. Then she held up the fist. "*Cheah*." And then the open hand, "*Tahncheah*." She whitened slightly and extended one of her hands for me to examine.

I took it, smiling to myself. We were going to get along, Gehl and I. We would teach each other.

Every day we met at that tree root as the Mission settlement took shape around us. When we were communicating fairly well, I in Garkohn and she in English, she began bringing a hunter to her lessons. The two were almost identical. Later, I noticed that Gehl was darker, slightly more blue, but at first, I could tell them apart only when the hunter sat so that his genitals were visible. It was this man—Ihiateh, his name was—who taught me that Garkohn men were not as poorly endowed sexually as most Missionaries thought. Their genitals were simply more protected within their bodies than were those of Missionary men.

Ihiateh was Gehl's temporary husband and once as the two sat talking with me, the huntress said something to arouse him. She spoke to him in a quick aside that I did not quite hear. Whatever the words were though, they gave Ihiateh an erection that no Missionary man

would have had reason to be ashamed of. I stared at him in surprise, then sat back waiting to see how they would handle the situation. I had already heard much from other Missionaries about Garkohn lasciviousness and immorality.

Gehl went white with what seemed to be amusement. Ihiateh spoke sharply to her, then caught her arm and dragged her off into the woods.

The next day, Gehl came to me alone and immediately began questioning me in her careful English.

"You have no man?"

I shook my head. She had learned to interpret the gesture. "Not yet. I must choose very carefully before I accept a man because by our custom, I would have to go through a ceremony with him and be as firmly tied to him as you would be to Ihiateh if you and he had a child."

Flecks of yellow mixed strangely with Gehl's deep green. She glowed slightly, making an iridescence. Doubt. Confusion. "You have a ceremony before there is a child?"

"Yes. Before the man and woman are even permitted to…" I frowned. I was speaking Garkohn and she English as usual. I had no word now though for what I wanted to say. "How do you say, to come together as with a man and woman, to…?"

"To mate?" she said in Garkohn. It was exactly the same word I had heard her use in referring to animals. I had known it, but had not realized that it should also be applied to people. The Missionaries made careful distinctions in English. Animals mated or bred. Humans obeyed the first commandment of God: "Be fruitful and multiply."

"Mate," I said. "Yes."

"But so often a union is childless… What do your people do? Must a man and woman stay together in sterile union?"

I thought about that and found myself wondering whether she was inadvertently telling me the reason for some of what the Missionaries called Garkohn immorality—the frequent coupling and uncoupling of Garkohn adults. Perhaps what the Missionaries had seen as a matter of morality was more a matter of necessity. Perhaps the Garkohn were just not as fertile as the Missionaries.

"They would not be held permanently in such a union," I said. "But they would have to stay together long enough to be certain that their union was sterile. They are joined by our law. They are not permitted to seek other partners until their union is dissolved by law."

Gehl flashed yellow disapproval. "I would not like to be trapped in such a union. Will you choose a man soon?"

I shuddered. I was young and could get away with my disinterest in Missionary men now. They were certainly not interested in me.

They had been during my early days among them when I had known no better than to go with them to secret places where we could break Mission law together. I stopped that as soon as I understood that I was risking the comfort and security that I had found with the Verricks—as soon as I understood that the men and I were "behaving like animals" together instead of marrying and keeping true human tradition. Then the men and I had no more interest in each other. There was no one of them that I wanted a marriage with, and now they pretended to find me contemptible because I was not "pure." I had shared pleasure with some of them. I was guilty of sin, but somehow, they were all still innocent. Foolishness! It disgusted me to think I would have to spend my life with anyone so foolish.

"I'm in no hurry to choose a man," I told Gehl. "I don't want to be trapped either."

"I will break with Ihiateh soon," she said. "Natahk has asked me to come to him."

"Gehl, will you help me learn to hunt?"

Her narrow eyes widened, and for the first time, her furry face seemed to show expression. Surprise. "To hunt?" she said. "But you have food. There is meklah over all the valley, and we bring you meat. And in time, you can kill some of your own animals and plant your own crops."

"It will be awhile before we can slaughter many of our animals," I said. "And though it is good of your people to help us, bring us meat, we should learn to help ourselves. We should learn what we can of your ways of hunting just as we learn to speak with you."

"Most of your people are not learning to speak. We learn your English."

"Then we should change."

"You need not. We are content and your people are content. Why should there be change?"

"Will you help me learn to hunt?"

She gazed downward, answered softly. "No. Natahk has forbidden it."

"Forbidden…"I frowned. "Why?"

"He has not said."

She was lying. There was no new yellow in her coloring but there was suddenly an odd tension in the way she held her body. She was suppressing emotion, holding her coloring normal as Missionaries might hold their faces placid in spite of fear or anger. But I knew her well enough now to see through the deception.

"I speak your language well enough now," she said. "I think we need not meet again."

I stared at her. In spite of whatever had suddenly fallen between

us, I had come to think of her as a friend. I had felt more comfortable with her in the short time that we had been meeting than I had felt with many of the Missionaries after three years. She was more like me somehow. Freer, less concerned with appearances.

"You know English," I said, "and I know Garkohn. In the exchange, haven't we become friends?"

Now she yellowed, just slightly. "I think you are a fighter."

"When I have to, I fight. You know that we don't divide ourselves into clans as you do."

"I know." She sighed, then suddenly flared yellow. "Sometimes it is foolish to make individual friendships among foreign fighters. But we will try a little foolishness." Her coloring settled back to normal. "Perhaps soon you will have a friend highly placed."

"So?"

"I…you will say nothing of this to anyone?"

"I'll say nothing."

"I'm going to challenge the Third Hunter. I can beat him. I know I can."

I was impressed. I had seen the Third Hunter and he was impressive. If Gehl really thought she could beat him…

"Natahk knows," said Gehl. "He says my ambition will kill me. He knows that if I beat the Third Hunter, I will take on the Second."

"But you will not challenge Natahk himself, after that?"

She gave me a look of yellow disgust. "I do want to live, Alanna. I only challenge where there is a chance for me to win. No Garkohn would challenge Natahk until he is old and weak."

I grinned. I had not seen anyone among the Missionaries who would have dared to challenge the massive Garkohn leader either. Not without a gun in his hand, at least.

"Come tonight and eat with my parents and me," I told her. "Soon you may be too busy for such things."

She looked thoughtful. "I can bring Ihiateh?"

I tried to hold back, but suddenly I found myself laughing aloud. "Bring him, Gehl, but…"

"I know." She whitened. "He already knew some Missionary ways and he told me. I think he would have beaten me yesterday if he could have. I won't provoke him here among your people again."

Alanna passed through the high gates of the stockade with the raiding party and saw before her a town far more finished than it had been when she was abducted. There were more houses now. The settlement was much like the walled town the Missionaries had lived in back on Earth. As on Earth, the houses and storage buildings were grouped comfortably around a wide expanse of open land held in common by

all the people. The common was landscaped as it had been on Earth with one difference. For some reason, there was no grass—no neatly cut lawn for the people to sit or lie on. There were a few flowers—Earth flowers—flourishing in the alien soil. There was bare hard-packed ground, and there were tall meklah trees connected to each other by thick benchlike roots. Clumps of trees formed natural gathering places. Or the people could gather in the open as they were doing now around the raiding party. The Missionaries who had stayed behind and the several Garkohn who happened to be at the Mission settlement gathered around the raiding party just in front of the largest fragment of the ship that was left intact—the great, nearly hollow shell that served as the Mission Church.

Alanna found herself struggling to comprehend the words of welcome and congratulation that came both in English and in Garkohn. Both languages spoken quickly and carelessly sounded oddly foreign to her. More than once, she found herself mentally translating them into Tehkohn as though Tehkohn was her native language.

During the first moments, she was jostled but otherwise ignored by people eager to greet relatives or get a look at the prisoners. Missionaries in particular came to stare with a mixture of hostility and curiosity at the silent Tehkohn.

Finally, people began to notice Alanna. Her clothing attracted them. She was clearly a woman and yet she was dressed in pants and a short belted tunic—clothing forbidden by the Missionary interpretation of Deuteronomy 22:5, which they chose to enforce strictly. “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.” Thus Neila Verrick had quoted when Alanna, fresh from the wilds where she had gone almost naked, complained about the bothersome long dresses all Missionary girls and women wore. Alanna had never taken the prohibition seriously. As soon as the Tehkohn asked her what she needed to keep her furless body warm, she had described her present clothing to them. An artisan had managed to turn out exactly what she wanted and she had worn it in warmth and comfort ever since.

Now the Missionaries came to stare at her and at her strange clothing. She looked at their furless faces with interest. Many of the men had beards but that was not the same as the all-over fur covering of the Kohn. Through much of her time with the Tehkohn, she had longed to see another Earth-human face. Sometimes she had felt alone and more lonely than she ever had in the wilds of Earth—a different kind of loneliness. Now, finally, she was surrounded by the faces she had longed to see, and she felt herself to be among strangers. She felt

confused, vaguely frightened. People spoke to her and she did not answer them.

"Alanna!"

"You're Alanna Verrick, aren't you?"

"Don't you remember me, Alanna?"

"Were you with those animals all this time?"

"Hey, Alanna…"

They clustered around her, greeting her, welcoming her home, while she longed desperately to be at home. To be at the home she had left in the mountains. To be away from this crowding shouting gesturing mob. What was wrong with these people? The raiding party had not behaved this way.

Since she would not speak, the people began to talk about her rather than to her.

"It is the Verrick wild human, isn't it?"

"It's her all right—though dressed like that…"

"Why doesn't she say something?"

"You know, she never was too bright." This from an older woman who had never quite been able to forgive Alanna's wild-land origins. "Maybe she's forgotten how to speak English."

"Why not," said someone else. "The Tehkohn had her almost as long as we did."

Then Neila Verrick was there, hurrying through the crowd, her face wet with tears. "Alanna! Oh, it is you. Alanna, girl…"

In Neila's arms, Alanna found her first moments of peace within the stockade. Her fear and her feelings of isolation began to ebb and she could smile at the woman who had become her mother. She could start to feel at home.

Now she grew more aware of her body's discomfort. Now she had relaxed enough to concern herself with mere discomfort. She was hungry and weary and in need of meklah. The meklah need was only strong enough to emphasize her hunger, so far, causing her to feel as though she had been without food for many hours longer than she actually had. It was only nightfall—a half day since Natahk had forced her into readdiction. But she had eaten nothing since then, nothing for most of the day except that single yellow fruit.

It did not matter. For the moment, nothing mattered as she greeted her foster mother. She could hear people near her asking questions again. How had she survived? What had the Tehkohn done to her? Where were the other captives? Only this last question made any impression on her. There were people around her whom she recognized now as relatives of those who had died in the Tehkohn prison room. She did not want to tell them that their relatives were dead. She was still too close herself to the pain of losing a loved one

and she did not want to watch as that pain replaced the hope in these people's faces. Now was the time to concentrate on keeping the living alive, not on mourning the dead.

Still without speaking, she let Neila lead her into the Verrick cabin.

The main room of the cabin was as cluttered as she remembered it, full of the tools, furniture, and utensils of Missionary life. The room was used for cooking, for eating, for almost any work that could be done indoors, and simply for gathering together and taking pleasure in each other's company. The room, like Neila's presence, helped Alanna to bridge the two-year gap and rejoin herself to her Missionary past. She needed that past now to help her know how best to reach the Missionaries through their xenophobic shield. With a little rest now, and food, she would be ready to begin on Jules and Neila.

But weary as she was, she saw that she was not to be left alone yet. Just before Neila shut the door, a tall Garkohn huntress slipped in fully camouflaged. Neila seemed not to see her, but Alanna saw her plainly, marveled at her carelessness. No Tehkohn would use camouflage so poorly and expect it to be successful. But clearly the Garkohn got away with it at the Mission settlement. Or they had been getting away with it. Now was the beginning of the end of that. Alanna greeted the huntress quietly.

"Gehl"

The huntress dropped her camouflage, became as visible to Neila as she had been to Alanna. Beside Alanna, Neila jumped, made a quick "Oh!" of surprise.

"Alanna," murmured Gehl. This huntress had taught Alanna the Garkohn language and in return, Alanna had taught her English. Two years ago, Gehl had been a friend. Even now, with all the changes that had taken place, Alanna realized that she was glad to see the huntress. Gehl's presence, like Neila's, made the settlement seem more like home. But Gehl was Garkohn. Did she come now as persona] friend or tribal enemy.

"Your eyes are good," said Gehl in English.

"Very good," agreed Alanna.

"And you are strong—even stronger than I thought you were. In my life, I have never seen anyone return alive from Tehkohn captivity."

"Your strength was promising too," said Alanna. "What is your rank now?"

"Second, as I said it would be."

"So. And it has cost you." There was something wrong with Gehl's left eye. Alanna had not noticed it at first. Over the eye's natural deep green, there was a white film.

“It was worth the price,” said Gehl.

“Can you see out of that eye?”

“No. It doesn’t matter.” It mattered, and Gehl knew it. Her blind eye coupled with her high position would increase the number of her challengers dramatically. And every challenger would strike at her one good eye. Sooner or later, someone would hit it. But that was Gehl’s problem.

Alanna shrugged. “Are you with Natahk now?”

“We are together.” She switched to Tehkohn abruptly. “Though I have been less fortunate than you.”

Alanna lifted her head slightly and answered in Tehkohn. “You’ve already spoken to Natahk then.”

“So.”

“And after hearing what he had to say, you still think me fortunate?”

Gehl looked away. “No. I would not have wished you…that pain. Not even now when we must cause each other pain.”

“Must we? We were friends once.”

“Fighters of different tribes ask for pain when they form friendships.”

The two stared at each other for a moment. Then Gehl turned and walked out of the house.

“What was all that?” asked Neila.

Alanna rubbed a hand over her face. “That was the end of a friendship.”

“Because you were captured by the Tehkohn?”

“Yes. And because I survived.”

“She would rather you had died?”

“I don’t think so. She just can’t trust me any more.”

“You have an accent,” said Neila softly.

Alanna turned to look at her. “Accent?”

“You speak English with an odd accent. Tehkohn, I suppose. That may be what bothered Gehl.”

“I’ll get rid of it as quickly as I can. It might bother people more important than Gehl.” Alanna paused, looked at her foster mother with concern. “Does it bother you?”

Neila hugged her again. “Of course not. I’m so glad to have you home, nothing could bother me. Come over here. Look.” She led Alanna to Alanna’s old bedroom, small, clean, the bed made as though it was still in regular use. “People said, ‘Why don’t you turn it into a storage room now?’” Neila smiled. “And I said, ‘Because I don’t believe Alanna is dead. I’ll believe it when our men have gone to the Tehkohn dwelling and found out for themselves.’ It was the Garkohn who convinced everyone that you and the others were dead.” She

frowned. “Alanna…what about the others?”

“They really are dead.”

“Oh.” Neila turned away, her head bowed. Alanna went into the tiny bedroom that had been hers, saw the large wooden chest that held her clothing and possessions. It paralleled the bed on the opposite side of the room, leaving not much more than a T-shaped passageway to move in. There were curtains at the one small window and a cloth of the same pattern covering the chest. The bed was covered with a heavy quilt that had once belonged to one of Jules and Neila’s three children. The bedroom was as simple as the main room was cluttered. It was as simple as the rooms Alanna had shared with her husband.

She went back to Neila, started to lift her hand in a Tehkohn gesture of affection that had become second nature to her. But she caught herself and let her hand fall to her side before it touched Neila. She spoke quietly.

“I’m going to rest a little before I do anything else. I’m so tired…”

“How did you survive, Alanna?”

“I’ll tell you about it—you and Jules—as soon as he comes in. I just want to rest a little first.”

Neila said nothing, but as Alanna retreated to her room, she could feel her foster mother’s gaze following her with curiosity. Innocent dangerous curiosity.

CHAPTER THREE

Diut

We captured Alanna along with eight others of her kind and twelve Garkohn. The Garkohn, we knew, would die during their period of cleansing. They had been dependent on the meklah for too many generations ever to be cleansed. But as far as we knew, their strange new allies, who called themselves Missionaries, had only just come to the poison. We thought some of them might survive.

I realized later that if I had separated the Missionaries from the Garkohn—shut them in different rooms for cleansing—more Missionaries might have lived. As it was, they were unnerved by the fatalism of the Garkohn. Alanna said later that several of them gave up their lives almost without a struggle when they saw how completely the Garkohn had given up.

As it was though, I knew almost nothing of the Missionaries. They had joined themselves with the Garkohn and I had decided to treat them as Garkohn until they proved otherwise. Only Alanna gave me the proof I sought. Only she lived.

When the five-day period of cleansing was over, I went to the room where she and the others had been held. My fighters were cleaning the room and clearing out the corpses for burning. I saw her, strangely colored, furless, very thin after her ordeal, covered with filth. I thought she was dead, but as I was about to turn away from her, she moved. I brought her water from a pot on one of the carts my hunters had brought in. The water was for washing the room, but none of it had been used yet. I knelt beside Alanna, spoke to her in Garkohn.

“Can you understand me, Missionary?”

She turned her face to me weakly and I could see that it was cut and bruised. Her eyes were swollen shut. I supposed that she was still

in pain. There is no gentle way to rid one's body of the poison and become clean.

She made a sound that was not a word and I realized that she could not speak. She had become so hoarse from screaming in pain that her voice was temporarily gone. From my cupped hands, I gave her water to drink. She swallowed it eagerly. I would not let her have as much as she wanted or let her drink it as quickly as she wanted. I had seen enough of my Tehkohn survive the meklah to know how easily she could make herself sick again.

I looked around the room at my fighters. "Who captured this Missionary?" I asked.

"I did," said one of my judges. Jeh. He was loading the body of a Garkohn huntress onto the cart that would take the dead out for burning. He threw the dead woman onto the cart and came over to us. He is a friend, Jeh. We were children together, though he is older. I sided with him when he broke tradition and began a liaison and then a marriage with the huntress Cheah. He is a well-colored judge, and she, a well-colored huntress. Neither of their clans wished to have them marry out. But they fought all challengers for their right to do so, in accordance with ancient custom. When they had each beaten their challengers and the people continued to complain, I said "Enough." I was still very young then but the people obeyed me. Jeh and Cheah were left alone. Now Jeh looked down at the Missionary he had captured.

"I thought she might live," he said. "She almost took my eyes when I caught her. And three days ago, Cheah and I found her crawling out of this room."

"She found her own way out?"

"Yes. By accident perhaps."

"Or perhaps not. Her people may not all be as blind as our watchers think."

"None of them saw our watchers."

I let my body whiten a little. "None saw them and knew them as Tehkohn, no. But to people as different as this one," I touched Alanna with my foot, "Tehkohn and Garkohn must look much alike."

"Our watchers say this one is the daughter of the Missionary leader."

"So? That may be important in the future—if you can keep her alive now."

"Cheah and I will care for her if you wish."

I flashed positive white. "It would be best for fighters to care for her now. You will be able to handle her when her strength returns."

He looked from Alanna to me. "Aside from tending her injuries, what care shall we give her?"

"Begin teaching her our language, our ways—as in the old stories. There was a time when Garkohn survived the cleansing and our ancestors made good Tehkohn of them."

"But she is so different…"

"She is. But I wonder how much the differences matter. We will let her show us. Through her we will learn more of what her kind can do—more of what the Garkohn might use them for."

Jeh flashed white assent, then bent and lifted Alanna. She moaned as though in pain. Her pain was almost at an end though, if she proved tractable. Jeh and Cheah would treat her kindly. Kindness was best. She might be a valuable hostage someday. Meanwhile, it would be interesting to watch her change—to help her change. I would take part in her re-education myself. And I would see to it that if she was ever returned to her people, she would greet them as an emissary of the Tehkohn. She would speak to her parents for me and against Natahk.

For the first time in two years, Alanna lay on her own bed at the Mission colony and slid uncomfortably into a meklah dream. She had intended to use these moments of privacy to think, to plan a way to thwart Natahk—and Gehl. They both knew of her marriage. The fact that they kept it secret indicated that they planned to use the information to control her somehow. Natahk could make her a pawn of the Garkohn whenever he chose. And as soon as he realized that she was undoing his work, bringing the Tehkohn and the Missionaries together in peace rather than in war, he would begin to apply pressure. Thus, Alanna's first moves had to be direct and sweeping. She had to give the Missionaries a hard push so that if she was silenced or killed or abducted again, the Missionaries would go on along the path that she had pointed out to them. To guide them, though, she had to become one of them again—or as much one of them as she had ever been. Now, ironically, her renewed meklah addiction helped her slip back into the ways of her Missionary past. Meklah dreams had their uses.

Meklah dreams came to people who allowed themselves to reach the second stage of meklah withdrawal—the stage of remembering. The first stage was hunger, uncomplicated, but intense, and distinctly, hunger for one of the many meklah products of the valley. Another ripe sweet meklah fruit or tea made from the leaves of the meklah tree or bread made from the unripe fruit dried and ground to flour or… But the list was endless. Meklah was the staple of the valley. Even meat and fish were seasoned with it. The Garkohn fermented it to make a kind of wine. No one had trouble getting enough of it. The tree was an evergreen that grew wild all over the valley. People were

not even conscious of being addicted unless they left the valley—went into the mountains where the tree did not grow. Or unless they simply chose not to eat.

Fine sweat appeared on Alanna's forehead. She felt almost sick with hunger. The meklah was demanding. She was tempted to try to eat something that did not contain the meklah just to relieve her hunger a little. But she knew better. Eating anything other than meklah now would start her vomiting and bring her into full withdrawal. The time for her to risk that would come, certainly, but it had not come yet. Best to wait now and let the memories come as she knew they would.

She closed her eyes, let her thoughts drift into the past. It was not so much remembering as reliving. Only time was distorted so that she could experience the events of days, of months, in only minutes. In her mind, she returned to Earth.

There, she met a woman, small and slender with hair that was long and very black like Alanna's hair, and with eyes as narrow as Kohn eyes. And there was a man, as lean and tall as Alanna was now. His coloring was dark brown, almost black, contrasting strangely with the very fair skin of the woman. Alanna stood between them, her eyes only slightly narrowed, her skin a smooth medium brown.

They protected each other, these two, and together, they protected the child they had created. Even in the end when the Clayarks came to loot and kill, the man and woman held them off long enough for the child to escape.

Alanna had been eight years old then. And she was on her own. She had grown thin, hard, and feral stealing and foraging for herself. She had lived in the streets of the nearly deserted city of her birth, sometimes venturing out to the open land and to the walled Missionary town. By her fifteenth year when the Missionaries caught her stealing from their cornfield, she was an animal.

A Missionary guard shot her as she fled with an armload of corn. He was doing his job. Verrick Colony had lost too much in crops and in lives to disease-spreading thieves.

The shot only wounded her. The guard was stepping in close to finish her when Jules arrived. As she learned later, Jules had just lost his third and last child to the plague of Clay's Ark. No doubt that was why he reacted so emotionally to a scene that had become all too familiar at the colony.

He knocked the rifle from the hands of her would-be executioner before the man could fire. Then he lifted Alanna into his arms and carried her back to his home. If she had had the plague, his unwary handling of her could have cost him his life. Alanna, wild with tear and pain, struggled, tried to bite him. Fortunately, she was too weak

to succeed.

She recuperated from her wound in his house and he and his wife Neila began to teach her to be human again. She did not realize until later how difficult she must have made this for them. She bore them no love during those early days, and little gratitude. She obeyed them, when she understood enough to obey, because they were strong and wealthy beyond belief as she understood wealth. They had huge amounts of food and safe dry shelter—and they shared these things with her willingly. She obeyed them hoping to bribe them to continue their extravagance.

She had to learn Mission doctrine and unlearn many of the words and habits she had used in the wilds. Her habits were "dirty," her speech "obscene." She must change.

She listened and remembered and changed with a speed that startled the Verricks. Pleased, they began to teach her from the Bible and from a book called *The Missionaries of Humanity*, which interpreted the parts of the Bible that held special meaning for Missionaries. From this last book came the pledge that Alanna had to recite in the church before all the people of Verrick Colony: "I accept the Lord God who made man in His own image and gave him dominion over the universe. I accept Jesus Christ, the Son of God and of a human woman, as living proof of the kinship between God and humankind. The purpose of my life from this day forward will be to fulfill my role in our holy Mission—to preserve and to spread the sacred God-image of humankind."

Alanna said the words, even understood them. The Missionaries believed that their shape was sacred while the Clayark beast-shape—that of the four-legged mutant children born to plague survivors—was a work of Satan. So many words. Alanna simply recited the pledge so that Jules and Neila would be pleased and stop bothering her about it.

Not until she began to hear other Missionaries talk about exiling her back to the wilds, or at least sending her to another colony, did she begin to realize what valuable allies she had in the Verricks.

The colonists had never really accepted her. She represented the wild outsiders, diseased and healthy, who had preyed on them for years. Most Missionary adults were content to express their displeasure by complaining to each other. But their children were more direct. Alanna was sometimes followed by a jeering crowd of Missionary children. She first ignored them, then regarded them with silent contempt—children who had never known hunger, soft children who would not have lasted a day in the wilds. Several of them were adolescents, as old as she was or older. Old enough to know better.

Alanna made no move against them until they attacked her. Then she put her back against the wall of the nearest house and fought

them as though she had never left the wilds. She brought down four of them—one with her fist, one with a newly shod foot, and two with a stone she snatched up. The rest fled screaming back to their parents.

And their parents were outraged.

So the wild human had gone berserk. Just what everyone had been afraid of. After all, what could you expect from a creature more animal than human.

Jules came to Alanna's defense at once. He met with the people in the church and told them they had been lucky. Alanna had been attacked by at least ten people, he said, and yet she had not killed even one—though surely with her experience, she could have. Was that the behavior of a savage wild human? Which Missionary, attacked by ten people, would control himself as carefully?

When the meeting was over and the people had gone away grumbling more quietly, Jules went home and asked Alanna whether she actually had held back.

"You mean, could I have killed?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I could have."

He looked at a particularly large bruise on one side of her face. She had not come through the righting unbloodied. "Why didn't you?" he asked.

"It's a sin among the people here. Your Bible said it was a sin."

"'Thou shalt not kill,'" quoted Jules.

"Not that," she said. "It was one of the other verses that came to me. 'He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall surely be put to death.'"

Jules looked away from her for a moment, said nothing.

"If I had killed, wouldn't the people here have killed me?"

For a time she thought Jules would not answer her. Then, "Yes. They probably would have, regardless of the circumstances. And I don't think I would have been able to stop them."

"You would have tried?"

"Don't make it necessary for me to try. For your own sake, Alanna, be careful."

"I'm careful. All the time. I think the ones who attacked me have learned to be careful too now."

He grinned suddenly. "Yes, I don't think they'll bother you again. You taught them a lesson they needed."

She began to draw closer to him then. Twice, he had stood against his people for her. He had chosen to do this—as her parents, on that final day, had chosen to stay behind and fight. From the time of her parents' death, she had not been close to another person. Others were, at best, competitors for the limited food supply. At worst, they

were Clayarks, predators, willing to eat the flesh of normal humans whom they considered inferior primitives. But the Verricks had been different from the first. She could remember a time when she was recovering from her gunshot wound—a time when Neila sat beside her and put food into her mouth. This was the most overwhelming of her early Missionary experiences. In the wilds, if someone was weak and attempting to eat, someone else might come to pry the food out of his mouth—but never to put food in. And Neila Verrick had done another thing for her.

An older woman, Beatrice Stamp, had been visiting Neila while Alanna was recuperating. Alanna was pretending to be asleep. She often did that during her recuperation when people other than the Verricks were in the house. Thus she avoided seeing the smiles that even she could read as false, and the frowns from more honest people that were all too real. But Beatrice Stamp had already had her look at the captive wild human—she was one of those who had smiled. Now she had come to see Neila for another reason.

"Neila, I've been talking to some of the others and they agree. If we're going to keep the girl in the colony, surely she'd be happier with her own kind."

There had been a moment of silence, then Neila spoke quietly. "Her own kind? Who are you suggesting I give my daughter to, Bea?"

The older woman sighed. "Oh, my. I knew this was going to be difficult. But, Neila, the girl isn't white."

"She's Afro-Asian from what she says of her parents. Black father, Asian mother."

"Well, we don't have any Asians, but one of our black families might…"

"She has a home, Bea. Right here."

"But…"

"Most of the blacks here are no more interested than the whites in adopting a wild human. The ones who are interested have already been here. Jules and I turned them down."

"…so I'd heard."

"Then why are you here?"

"I thought that after you'd had a few days with the girl, you might…reconsider."

There was the sound of Neila's laughter. "Come to my senses, you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean!" snapped the older woman. "Several of us feel that you and Jules ought to be setting a better example for the young people here—not encouraging them to mix and…"

"Bring it up at the next council meeting, Bea." Neila sounded weary.

"I had hoped we wouldn't have to do that."

"If you feel it needs doing, do it. Now I'm awfully busy, so unless you had something else you wanted to discuss…"

Beatrice Stamp left, offended. Later when Alanna's speech was a little better—from the beginning, she understood more than she could say—she asked Neila about the incident. And she learned for the first time how important some Missionaries believed their own coloring to be.

"We'll be getting our ship soon," said Neila. "We'll be immigrating to a world all our own. I wonder whether people like Bea really think our small colony can survive separating itself into this and that race."

"She'll make trouble?" said Alanna.

Neila smiled unpleasantly. "She'd like to, but she wouldn't dare. The people here are too bound together already. She has no support except from her little clique of aging bigots."

"I'll stay here then?"

"Do you want to stay here, Lanna, with Jules and me?"

"Yes." Food, shelter, warm clothing, kindness. "Yes."

"This is your home then." Neila hugged her. For the first time, Alanna did not try to pull away. She was growing used to being touched.

Verrick Colony remained on Earth for two more years before it received its Mission Ship. By then, the Missionaries and Alanna had gotten used to each other. There was no more trouble even from Beatrice Stamp and her friends. Alanna had made a few friends herself. She had learned to read and write, and she could quote more from the Bible than most lifelong Missionaries. She was careful to observe Mission law even when, as often happened, it seemed foolish to her. She was as much a Missionary as she would ever become.

Finally, with the Missionaries of Verrick Colony, she prepared to leave Earth. There would be no returning. The Mission Ship would take the colonists and their supplies to a habitable new world, then it would die. It would become nothing more than a carcass to be cannibalized. The ship's builders were taking no chances. Only Earth's first starship, the *Clay's Ark*, had been allowed to return after its voyage. With it had come the Clayark microorganism, secure inside the bodies of the surviving members of the crew. The men and women of the crew, driven by a disease-induced need to spread their affliction, evaded their mandatory quarantine and examination. They escaped easily since no one had expected them to try to escape. Then they disappeared into the general population and gleefully began spreading a world-wide epidemic. The Clayark plague had killed over

half the population. It was still killing, and still causing the distinctive Clayark mutation in the young of its surviving victims.

The Missionaries were not leaving solely to escape the Clayark plague though. As Neila Verrick told Alanna on their last night at Verrick Colony, "We're going to fulfill our part in the Mission. We're going to spread the Sacred Image to one more world."

Alanna sat comfortably on the bare floor of the Verrick house listening to the pious words, and knowing that Neila believed them. But Alanna had heard words less pious from other Missionaries—words that bothered her. She frowned, spoke to Neila.

"Some people are saying the ship is a trick. They say there is no ship and we're being led like cattle to be slaughtered."

Neila sighed, put aside the book she had held open on her lap. She was sitting in a rocking chair made of wood. Her favorite chair, soon to be abandoned with the rest of the settlement's furniture. "Do you believe the rumor, Lanna?"

"That we are to be slaughtered? Even the people who say it don't believe it. If they did, nothing would move them from here."

Neila gave her a small relieved smile. "Exactly. And just to put your mind fully at ease, I'll tell you, I know the starships are real. I've seen them. I've seen them launched with Missionaries aboard. Most of the people here haven't had that experience, and they're a little afraid."

"They say the people who build the ships aren't Missionaries, so why should they help Missionaries."

"Because they're human—more or less. Because they care whether or not the human species survives. We Missionaries are their insurance. They have no choice but to stay here with the Clayarks. They think they can survive, but whether they can or not, they hope we will. Some of us, at least."

"They can't leave even though they have the ships?" said Alanna.

"That's right. We're lucky. If they could have left, they might have abandoned most of us. Their weakness gives us a chance."

"What weakness? What's wrong with them?"

"Some Missionaries say God has quarantined them on Earth in their city, their Forsyth. Chained them here for their own attempt at altering the Sacred Image."

"I've heard that talk."

"And you don't believe it—just as you don't really believe other more important things."

Alanna said nothing.

Neila shook her head. "Well, for once, I agree with you. The people who now live in Forsyth began altering themselves slowly by selective breeding thousands of years ago. Their founder is supposed

to have gotten the idea from the way the people of his ancient time bred animals. He guided his people to breed themselves as carefully as the rest of us breed our best animals. But through it all, they've retained the Sacred Image. They never meant to change it. It was their minds that they were struggling to reshape. And they worked only with people who were already slightly different. They began with small mutations and bred themselves to the power they have now. Now they can hear and see and heal and kill and more, all with their minds. And they still have all their physical senses. The power of their minds is extra.

"About fifty years ago, when the plague began to get out of hand, the people of Forsyth stopped pretending to be less than they were, and…"

"They pretended? They were in hiding in spite of all their power?"

Neila hesitated. "Yes. But not out of fear. They hid to keep their privacy and to live in their own way. Anyway, they stopped hiding. They brought scientists and technicians from all over the world and put them to work on more ships like the *Clay's Ark*—or larger and better than the *Ark*. The people of Forsyth already knew something about starships. Some of them had secretly had a hand in the building of the *Ark*. But now, they wanted the best possible ships. They wanted to find a world of their own and leave Earth to the Clayarks. But the first load of them to leave died before they were much beyond the orbit of the moon. Those back here could feel them dying, but couldn't help them. The distance was too great. After that, those here did some careful experimenting. They found that the telepathic adults—and most of the adults are telepathic—weren't able to break free of the mental ties they had with those they left here on Earth.

"For a while, there was talk of everyone leaving at once in several ships, but one unanswered question prevented them from doing that: What would happen if even one of their ships was disabled or destroyed? What would the mass destruction of that ship's occupants do to the people in nearby ships? The distant dying of the people on that first ship had been agonizing for the Earthbound observers. What would it be like to experience that agony at closer range? Could one ship drag the others down in a spiral of madness and death? They didn't want to find out. And they didn't want to risk the whole existence of their kind to only one huge ship, even though such a ship could have been built.

"So they go on building ships for us. And sometimes, they send groups of their children with us. The mental abilities of the children don't mature until sometime after puberty so the children tolerate space travel as easily as we do."

“And will they do that with us?” asked Alanna. “Send a group of their children?”

“No!” said Neila with sudden vehemence. “Not with us. Thank God, the leaders of Forsyth have promised us that much. Those children, Lanna…” She groped for words. “Those children are like the eggs some wasps lay inside the bodies of living caterpillars. They’re not evil, any more than any other parasite, but when they grew up, when their mental abilities matured, they would quietly, slowly, enslave us. Our Mission would be over, even forgotten, perhaps. They would become our gods.”

“They need not,” said Alanna. “They could be stopped.”

“But, I tell you, their power…”

“Need never mature. Missionaries are not helpless caterpillars. They can kill the children before the children mature.”

Neila stared down at her sadly. “Children, Alanna…?”

“Why not?” Alanna touched her side where the Missionary guard had shot her. “At least those children are really dangerous.”

“Yes… And I’m sure any Missionaries who knew about them would kill them if they could. But it’s not that simple. You see, the people of Forsyth are not only able to read minds, but to change them, condition them. Host Missionaries are programmed to be the best possible parents before they even see the children. They’re programmed to defend those children with their own lives.”

Alanna thought about that for a while, then said, “Now I see why our people here are afraid.”

“No. They don’t know most of what I’ve told you. It’s best that they not know.”

“Jules knows?”

“Yes. Jules and I.”

“How?”

“Jules and I were born in Forsyth, Lanna. We’ve already served our time of slavery.” She paused, stared straight ahead at nothing. “Twenty-five years ago we were freed and allowed to organize a group of newly arrived refugees into a Mission colony. Now, finally, I think we’re being rewarded for our earlier years of service.”

As it turned out, the reward was a second Earth. The Verrick Colony Mission Ship sought out a blue world of islands and island continents—a world that was not only habitable, but comfortable. A world so Earthlike that it made the Missionaries feel at first as though they had only moved to a different part of their homeworld. A clean new part.

Their ship, whose technology they had never understood, died right on schedule as soon as they touched down. Died, as they soon learned, was exactly the right word.

One of the first things they did upon landing was break into the sealed compartments that they had been warned not to touch while their ship was in space. Within, they found the engines, the Dana Drive, huge and incomprehensible, and they found a corpse.

The corpse frightened most of the people because they did not know who it had been or why it was there, freshly dead, in their ship. Also, the corpse was deformed.

It was the body of a young man, dressed in the bright-colored style of the city of Forsyth. His body was short and squat and his head large. His forehead bulged strangely on one side and seemed almost sunken on the other. His mouth was slack and half open, drooling. Jules looked down at him and wept the only tears Alanna had ever seen him shed. Then he ordered a pair of the younger men to dig a grave. He himself carried the corpse out to be buried, and when the people questioned him, he would tell them nothing. To Neila and Alanna, he said, "There are all kinds of slaves." He looked at Neila. "You know, don't you?"

She nodded. "They used to just destroy the defectives that they couldn't…repair. I didn't realize they'd stopped."

"They've found a use for them. That one must have been one of their own kind gone wrong."

"But what was he for, locked in there by himself?"

"Unless there's equipment—a computer or something—aboard that we haven't found, I'm going to assume that somehow, that man was our guidance system."

"But how could he…?"

"He could be programmed to do whatever they wanted him to do. You know that. Programmed to control the drive, and propel the ship to wherever his ability and his implanted knowledge told him there might be a habitable world. Then, when his job was finished, programmed to die. He couldn't have been a telepath or he would have died long ago, but he had useful abilities just the same."

"We should give him a funeral," said Neila. "At least."

They gave him a funeral.

Then, with nothing more than the tools and supplies and knowledge they had brought with them, they began learning to live on their new world.

They named the world Canaan, and prayed that it would live up to its name. The long yellow-green valley in which they had landed was like an answer to their prayer. It was on the equator, but high above the level of the local seas—plateau land stretched between two ranges of mountains. It was well watered by rivers that flowed down from the mountains and the ship's doctor pronounced the water safe. The weather was warm and mild, and the land apparently fertile. It

was literally covered with yellow-green trees and their thick vinelike roots, but the Missionaries saw no aggressive animal life. In fact, they saw almost no animal life at all, though they realized later that this was only because they did not know how to look for it. In time, they cleared a place and corralled their larger animals outside the ship. It was then that they learned why the portion of the valley in which they had landed seemed so lush and peaceful. They had landed in the middle of the Garkohn gamelands.

Garkohn adolescents, young hunters still working toward their first substantial kill of native game, slaughtered the Missionary herd in a single night. And at that, the Missionaries were fortunate. The tragedy would have been far greater had the youngsters failed to recognize the furless, strangely colored invaders as people—had they seen them as merely another kind of helpless animal.

The Missionaries did not learn exactly what had killed their livestock until several days later when Garkohn adults came openly into the Mission settlement bringing gifts of meat, meklah, and other things—apparently in payment for what their children had done. Of course, no payment would have been enough. The horses and cattle were irreplaceable. But they were gone. Nothing could bring them back, and trouble with the natives could well make their loss seem trivial.

Jules managed to hold the Missionaries in check, prevent any act of rashness. Under his leadership, the Missionaries formed what they came to consider a friendship with the Garkohn. It seemed as though they had salvaged a fair beginning after all. They permitted themselves to be lulled.

And now, three years later, they were still lulled. It was time for Alanna to awaken them.

Alanna rose wearily from her bed and went out into the cabin's main room. Jules came in through the front door at the same time, looking grayer and older than the Jules Alanna had just brought alive in her memory. He was fifty-three now. Not old, surely. He was tired but he would be able to handle the trouble that was coming. He went to his chair and collapsed into it.

Alanna went to the heavy meklah-wood dining table and took two meklah fruits from the bowl there. She ate one quickly, hating it with her mind as her body welcomed it. Her sick hunger began to dissipate. She ate the second fruit more slowly. When she turned to face Jules and Neila, both were staring at her. Neila spoke first.

"Did they have meklah in the mountains where you were?"

"No," said Alanna softly.

"You went without them for two years? You had none at all?"

"None." Alanna looked from her to Jules. At the time of Alanna's

abduction, no one in the colony had realized that the meklah was addictive. But now, “You know about it.”

“That we’re slaves to it,” said Jules bitterly.

“I tried to stop eating it once,” said Neila. “I thought I was dying.”

“You might have,” said Alanna.

“But you didn’t.”

“The others did. All of them, Garkohn and Missionary.”

“They locked you up,” accused Jules. “Then watched you suffer.”

Alanna looked at him in surprise. “They closed us all in a room together, but they didn’t watch. Who told you…?”

“Natahk. After you…and the others were taken, I asked him what would happen to you. He told me. That’s when we found out we were addicted. Deliberately addicted. The Garkohn knew what they were feeding us.”

“Of course,” said Alanna.

Jules frowned at her as she put the last of her second meklah fruit into her mouth. “Alanna, if you managed to survive without those things for two years, why did you go back to them. After what you went through, I’d think…”

“That Natahk would let me stay free, like a Tehkohn?”

“Natahk…?”

“The meklah is almost a sacred thing to the Garkohn, Jules. Friends eat it. Enemies don’t.”

Jules rose slowly, stood glaring at Alanna. He was one of the few men in the settlement who could glare at her without looking up. “You mean that’s what he wanted to see you about? To feed you that poison?”

“Yes.”

“And you said nothing to me about it?”

She laid a hand on his arm. “Here we are on his world, in his valley, trapped. What could you have done, Jules?”

He stared at her for a long moment, then he shook off her hand and turned away. “It didn’t take you long to size up the situation here. I was afraid we’d have to explain it to you.”

Confused, Alanna glanced at Neila. But Neila sank down into her own chair and sat staring into the fire in the fireplace.

“We had better explain to each other,” said Alanna softly. “I can see that you don’t consider the Garkohn the friends they seemed to be two years ago.”

“Clayark friends!” muttered Jules. Alanna had almost forgotten that bitter old epithet—the friend who caught the plague and managed to conceal it. The friend whose touch brought disease and possible death. The betrayer, the Judas.

Alanna smiled to herself. In her absence, Natahk had done her

work for her. He had become more heavy-handed, had prepared Jules to change his loyalties. “What was Natahk’s betrayal?” she asked.

“Aside from addicting us all, and readdicting you to the meklah?”

“Aside from that.” Alanna sat down on the floor, made herself comfortable.

“A chair, Alanna,” murmured Neila from years-old habit.

Alanna ignored her. “What has he done, Jules?”

“Nothing overt, I guess.” Jules sat down again. “Most of our people don’t even realize there’s anything wrong. But in more and more ways, he treats us as though we were just another branch of his tribe—like that farming town of his in the south. He seems to think he’s as free to exercise authority over us as he is over them.”

“His hunters spy on us,” said Neila. “They camouflage themselves here in the settlement and watch and listen to us. I’ve caught a couple of them at it the way you caught Gehl today.”

“Gehl was here?” asked Jules.

“She came to see me,” said Alanna. “But she came hidden, and she needn’t have.”

“How did you happen to spot her?”

“She was careless. Her camouflage was bad.”

“I didn’t see her,” said Neila. “Not until you spoke.”

Alanna shrugged. “Maybe my eyes are sharper.”

“At your age, they should be,” said Jules. “But still…you said Gehl was careless. What if she had really been making an effort not to be seen. Do you think you could have spotted her?”

“A huntress? I think so. From now on, I’ll be watching.”

“Exactly what I was going to suggest. I don’t like the idea that there might be people watching me, spying on me even in my own home. And I’ve been living with it too long.”

“Most of the people still think of the Garkohn as not very bright,” said Neila. “They see that while only a few of us know the Garkohn language, all the Garkohn we deal with know English. They see that, but still, when they catch the Garkohn spying, they say, ‘Oh, well, they’re just curious—like monkeys, you know.’”

Jules made a sound of disgust. “We didn’t underestimate the Clayarks that way,” he said. “If we had, they would have murdered us all. That fur covering seems to make it so easy for some of us to assume that the Garkohn are stupid. Nonsense! Dangerous nonsense!”

“What will you do?” asked Alanna.

“That’s a question I’ve been asking myself for some time. I could call a meeting and force the people ~o face the facts that they’ve been refusing to face. That we’re becoming prisoners in our own settlement. That would bring Natahk out into the open quickly enough.”

“Anything you do that’s out of the ordinary will bring him into

the open. I wonder what that would mean."

"Slavery," said Jules. "Or something very like it. Natahk's gone to too much trouble to watch quietly as we begin reasserting our independence."

"Perhaps slavery," agreed Alanna. "But I don't understand why the Garkohn would want or need slaves. They have no history of slavery."

"They do," said Neila. "The nonfighters."

Alanna glanced at her. "No. Some fighters see nonfighters as lesser people—a little like the way Bea Stamp sees me. But they don't make slaves of them." She changed the subject suddenly. "Jules, did Natahk leave?"

"Yes. He and most of his raiders. I thought they would stay the night."

"His raiders only? What about his prisoners?"

"They're quartered with ours in one of the storehouses for the time being. Although… Natahk acted as though they might be here for quite a while."

"So the Garkohn and I agree on something," said Alanna. Then she realized that she had spoken in Tehkohn, her first such lapse since arriving home. Neither Jules nor Neila looked anything more than curious, so she explained in English. "I think Natahk is worried about your welfare. Whatever he plans to do with you, you won't be of any use to him dead. By now, Tehkohn who are not captives know that important members of their tribe are held here. They won't attack for fear of causing those members to be killed."

"You think they know already?"

"Jules, we didn't come down from those mountains alone."

Jules looked surprised and his surprise startled Alanna. Even if he had not seen the raiding party's Tehkohn shadows, it would seem reasonable for him to suspect that they were there. But then, he did not know the true value of the prisoners Natahk had left with him.

"You think the Tehkohn might have attacked us if Natahk hadn't left his prisoners here?" he asked.

"They would have. At night, probably, not like before. This time, I don't think there would have been enough of us left to make a colony."

"In spite of our wall, our guns, you think they could have…"

"I know they could have. Natahk knew it too. We're naked here, Jules. The Tehkohn know about our guns now. Most people wouldn't get a chance to fire a shot."

"You're forgetting that we know quite a bit about the Tehkohn now too. We just helped win a substantial victory over them."

Alanna lowered her head for a moment, carefully not thinking

about that victory. “Did you ever think there might be a way for us to use the Tehkohn? A way that didn’t involve fighting them.”

Jules frowned. “What way?”

“They could help you against Natahk.”

Jules sat up straight. “And do you think I’d want their help? Do you think I’d trust them? My God, as bad as the Garkohn are, at least they’ve never murdered any of my people.”

Alanna spoke softly. “I’m not sure the Tehkohn would have killed any of us either if Natahk’s hunters hadn’t been using our settlement as a base for their raids on the Tehkohn.”

“And on the other hand, the settlement might have been totally destroyed if the Garkohn hadn’t been here during that first raid.” Jules’s voice was bitter. That first raid had taught him just how easily naked unarmed natives slaughtered armed Missionaries.

“But…whatever might have happened, you’re even with the Tehkohn now. They’ve beaten you. You’ve beaten them. Now you can use them. Let them keep the Garkohn busy and away from you. They’ve been fighting Garkohn for generations anyway. Now you have a chance to urge them back to it. Then you’ll have the freedom to run or join in or do whatever you think is best.”

“Manipulate them, you mean? Trick them into ignoring us while they fight each other?”

“Not quite. But the effect would be the same.”

“What do you mean, ‘not quite’?”

“Working alone, I don’t think we can trick the Tehkohn or the Garkohn. We’re at war with the Tehkohn and that means most of the prisoners we hold won’t believe anything we say. There’s no lie we could tell them, no trick we could use that wouldn’t be either ignored or even used against us. We’re enemies and they would rather kill themselves than co-operate with us in any useful way. And as for the Garkohn, we dare not try to manipulate them into more hostility. They’d drag us in with them.”

“They’d do that regardless.”

“No. Not if we let the Tehkohn think we’re on their side. They can help us stay out of it—or out of most of it. After all, it will be better for them if we stay out.”

“From what you’ve said so far, I don’t see how we can make the Tehkohn think anything at all.”

“We can change their thinking toward us. Because we can do the one thing Natahk can’t do. We can make peace with them. Even now, we can make peace.”

“With people who won’t believe a word we say. With people we certainly don’t have any reason to trust. With kidnapers and murderers…”

"But…"

"No, let me finish. What do you think would happen if we did make overtures to the Tehkohn, successful or not, and the Garkohn found out. They would, you know, the way they spy on us. And what do you think they would do then? Surely slavery would be too gentle."

"Will you hear me, Jules?"

"I'd rather listen to you in the morning when you've…when we've both had food and sleep and time to think."

"No, now, please. Because now you have a prisoner you can work through—one of the ones Natahk left. He's a leader of the Tehkohn and I think he'd listen to you if you approached him. He's freer to decide who to trust than the others are, and if he gives you his promise, you can trust him."

"An honorable butcher."

"A fighter, yes. All the ones with authority are fighters. But he could help you against Natahk."

"I don't want his…"

"And he's not going to be here long."

"What?"

"He's the blue one, Jules, the big one. And what he would face at the Garkohn dwelling is a lot worse than just meklah addiction. I don't think he'll wait for it. He'll either escape soon or get killed trying." She took a deep breath. This talk was forcing her to put into words things she had not even wanted to think about. But she went on. "If you talk to him and he's killed, you lose nothing. But if he escapes, he can go back to his people as your emissary. He can not only stop their vengeance, but make them our allies. If you'll just talk to him."

"Alanna, do you know how many of our people have been kidnapped by the Tehkohn since you were taken? Kidnapped and apparently murdered."

Alanna opened her mouth to answer, then realized fully what he had said. "Since I was taken?"

"In the two years since you were…"

"Wait a moment." She frowned. "There haven't been any Tehkohn raids on the Mission colony since I was taken."

Jules stared at her. "Listen, girl, the Tehkohn may have kept what they were doing from you, but…"

"They couldn't keep it from me! Jules, I wasn't locked up somewhere for two years. I was working out among the people. I spoke their language, and I couldn't help knowing what was going on. There were two raids on the Garkohn. I saw the raiders leave, and I saw them come back with Garkohn prisoners—only Garkohn. No Missionaries."

"I saw them take three people," said Neila. "They almost took me

too."

"Not the Tehkohn."

"Lanna, you're wrong! I saw…"

"You saw natives abducting people. Who told you they were Tehkohn?"

Neila stared at her, speechless.

"I don't know what's happened here," Alanna continued. "But whatever it was, the Tehkohn weren't part of it. What they did do to us was bad enough, but if we don't put that behind us, and join with them, we're finished. Only they can help us to stop our more treacherous enemies—our Clayark friends."

Jules looked at her silently for a long time—too long. He looked at her until she knew he was wondering about her own loyalty. She met his gaze and hid her sudden fear.

"You saved me once," she said softly. "You didn't have to. People said, 'She's an animal. She'd be better dead.' But you saved me. Let me save you."

"I don't believe what you're saying, Lanna—that our people are being abducted by the Garkohn."

"You will."

"But why would they bother? They already have us trapped here in a meklah cage."

"Maybe to make more trouble between you and the Tehkohn. Maybe to make the stolen people work as slaves—I don't know." And then she did know. The idea came to her so suddenly that she almost spoke it aloud. But she caught herself in time. This was not a thing for her to say to her foster father. He had already looked at her with suspicion. Let her husband tell him—if she could ever bring the two together, if the Garkohn had not destroyed all hope of an alliance.

They were not taking slaves, the Garkohn, although Jules would see it that way. He had said himself what they were doing, although he did not know it. He had complained that Natahk treated the Missionaries as though they were just another branch of the Garkohn. Well, by now, according to Kohn custom, the Missionaries were exactly that. The abducted Missionaries were in the southern part of the valley at the Garkohn farming town. And like Alanna, they had found out for themselves how human the Kohn people were. She spoke to Jules.

"For the sake of the people we have left here, Jules, talk to the Tehkohn Hao."

"Form an alliance with him?"

"Yes, if he'll co-operate." He would try. Surely he would try.

"And if he won't?"

"Then we have no chance. You know it. We can't fight either tribe

alone. We can't even run with both tribes considering us fair game. Not that we'd know where to run anyway—to avoid running into people worse than the Tehkohn or the Garkohn."

Jules sat staring downward at his clenched hands, and Alanna imagined what he must be feeling. The Missionaries looked to him for leadership. They had ever since he had brought them together as a colony. He had always been much aware of his responsibility to them. Now the best he could do for them was choose which of the many dangers he would expose them to. And he had to choose quickly. His prime prisoner might escape even that night.

"Jules, I'm pushing, I know. I have to push. Will you see the Tehkohn Hao?"

He sighed. "Tell me about him, Lanna. Make me understand why you trust him so much."

If only she could, she thought wearily. But no, the half truths had to go on. "I trust his ability to handle his people," she said. "If he decides we're worth helping, we'll get help."

"One Tehkohn," said Jules. "What would it take to make some other Tehkohn challenge him and get rid of him?"

"The same thing it would take to make you overrule the Bible words of Jesus Christ."

"Alanna!" said Neila, shocked.

"The Hao are not overruled except by other Hao. And the only other Tehkohn Hao is old and not active in governing the people any longer. Diut's word will stand."

"His kind are considered gods?"

"No. The Kohn don't pray to him. They don't expect him to perform miracles—exactly. But they obey him as though they thought he was a god. Even the Garkohn are glad to obey him when they can. It's more…more comfortable than disobeying. He's like a symbol that God or fate or something is on your side if you have him."

"A walking good luck charm."

"Maybe. Whatever he is, his power is in the natural reaction of the Kohn people to blue—to that special kind of blue. No Kohn other than the Hao can attain it and all Kohn seem to be in awe of it."

"But if the Garkohn are in awe of him…"

"But he's not their Hao. In things that don't matter much, they'll obey him, honoring his blue. Remember when they were knocking some of their prisoners around just after the raid? He told them to stop and they stopped."

"I saw that. I wondered about it. And they wouldn't let my men paint him."

"It would be sacrilege to mar the blue."

Jules looked at her strangely. "Yes, that's what they said."

“They mean to have that blue for themselves. They intend to keep him—damage his legs so that he can’t escape. They might not force the meklah on him, but they would call him Garkohn Hao. A captive Hao doesn’t lead unless he renounces his former people and shows that he has joined his captors. But whether that happens or not, his presence gives his captors unity and strength that they’ll turn and use—in this case, against the Tehkohn. Diut won’t let that happen. And he’s a man in need of allies now, Jules. Even if he breaks free, you can be of use to him, and him to you.”

Jules was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, “I’ll talk to him, girl. I won’t promise anything or bow down to his blue, but I’ll talk to him.”

“Nobody bows. They call him Tehkohn Hao instead of his name and they look at him. No more formality than that.”

“What do you mean, they look at him? What’s special about that?”

“It’s insulting to look away from him when he’s talking. What he’s saying with his coloring can be as important as what he’s saying with his mouth. Even if you don’t understand, it’s best to look at him.” This was a small thing. Diut did not demand it of his close friends or his family. He would not have demanded it of Jules. But he would notice if Jules seemed to be refusing to look at all—as Jules surely would without this warning. The Hao appearance took some getting used to, especially at close quarters, and for the sake of the colony, Jules had to get used to it quickly. If he did not, Diut would sit and talk to him and listen and learn whatever he could about the Missionaries. He would behave with respect as Kohn custom demanded that he behave toward the father of his wife, but he would promise Jules nothing. Eventually, he would make his escape and abandon the Missionaries to their fate.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alanna

My first memories as I came out of withdrawal were of pain, cold, hunger, and thirst. Someone gave me water—not enough. Someone lifted me and carried me to a place that was warm.

Someone tore my filthy ragged clothing from my body and washed me. I felt as though I was again under the care of the Verricks and the Mission doctor—as though I was reliving my first hours with the Missionaries. I kept listening for Jules's voice or the voice of Dr. Bartholomew. But the voices I heard were strange to me. They spoke in a language I could not quite understand. Then I remembered that I had been captured, that the speakers must be Tehkohn. I couldn't see. My eyes were swollen shut. I was able to take a little more water though, and something that must have been a kind of soup. Finally, I fell asleep under the care of my captors.

When I had slept for a time—I had no idea how long—I was awakened by people talking near me. I tried to open my eyes, found that I could, a little. The swelling was going down. Through the blurred screen of my own eyelashes, I could see two Tehkohn. Cold dim light came from patches of luminescence scattered on the wall behind them and the Tehkohn themselves radiated some light—glowed softly. One was blue-green and about my size, and the other was blue. Deep blue all over and huge—larger than any native I had ever seen, and perhaps larger than any of the Missionaries. He had the powerful stocky build of a hunter, but no hunter could have been as tall. And there was something different about the way the native looked. I couldn't see him clearly enough to know just what, but something besides his size was bothering me, frightening me. I moved a little, trying to see him better. My movement attracted his attention and he came over to me.

He knelt beside me and I tried to see his face clearly. But he had ceased to radiate light now and his deep blue was swallowed in the shadows of the room. He seemed only a shadow himself there beside me, and in spite of my fear, I reached out to touch him—to find out for certain whether or not I was dreaming.

The blue-green man in the background spoke to me sharply in Garkohn, but the blue one silenced him with a gesture. Then he held out a dark shadowy arm to me. I felt the thick soft fur and the hard hand with its thick clawlike nails. The huge Tehkohn was real. And he was clearly a person of authority. He was probably deciding now what was to be done with me.

And what might he decide? What else would I have to face now that I had survived meklah withdrawal? I lay still, feeling even more frightened and helpless than I had during my first hours among the Missionaries. But I was too weak to sustain even fear for long. I drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke again, I was stronger. I could see better though the room was only a little brighter than it had been. There were no windows. The irregular wall patches still gave off their dim light and now there was also light from a low fire in a large fireplace. The fireplace was rounded and deep, protruding farther into the room than it would have in a Missionary house. I lay on the floor near it, wrapped in furs. Not far from me lay a Tehkohn man and woman quietly making love.

I slept again, awoke, and finally got a good look at two of my captors. I recognized them. There was a huntress, unusually small, very quick, her coloring a deeper green than I had seen among the Garkohn. With her was her husband or temporary mate, the blue-green man. The man was the same one who had captured me at the Mission colony. I remembered that now—his coloring, his height. I would have killed him if I could have. As it was, I had nearly blinded him. But he had won. And later, during my withdrawal, he won again, he and the huntress. I had searched for hours—at least for hours—to find a way out of the prison room away from the sickness and the dying. Away from people who could think of nothing better to do than wait to die.

Finally, I found the hidden door and got out. Then this man and woman found me. I was not strong enough to fight them. They simply lifted me and threw me back into the room. I swore to myself then that I would kill them. Of all the Tehkohn I had seen, I could think of none who deserved death more.

And yet here I was alone with them in their apartment, weak as a child, and totally at their mercy. I lay watching them and wondering what they would do to me.

The huntress came over and knelt beside me. She spoke in Garkohn. “Can you understand me?”

“Yes,” I said. I was still hoarse, but my voice was returning.

“Ah. Good. Do you have pain?”

“When I move.”

“Pain in your muscles, yes. That goes away easily. I have ointment. No pain here?” She laid a hand on my stomach.

“No.”

“Good. You’re, healing.” She rubbed my body with a pungent-smelling ointment that felt cold at first, and then very warm. Almost at once, I began to feel better. And I became less apprehensive. Clearly, these people wanted me healthy. I wondered why.

I managed to sit up and the blue-green man brought me a wooden bowl filled with a kind of stew that I had never tasted—stew thick with tender chunks of meat. I ate slowly, savoring it.

“What are you called?” the man asked.

“Alanna.”

He repeated my name courteously, then added, “I am Jeh.”

“And I’m Cheah,” said the huntress.

I repeated both names.

“We are husband and wife,” said Jeh. “You will stay with us for a while. We will teach you Tehkohn ways.”

I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath in relief. It would be only the Missionary experience again then. In exchange for food, shelter, and safety, I would learn to say the right words and observe the right customs—change my cultural “coloring” again and fade into Tehkohn society as much as I could. If I could. If I couldn’t, at least I would be able to bide my time until I was strong again. Strong enough to try to find my way back to the valley—or at least to take my revenge.

“I will learn,” I told Jeh quietly.

He whitened, pleased. Then he said something in Tehkohn to Cheah and turned and left the apartment.

“Is he a hunter?” I asked Cheah when he was gone.

She flashed white and I thought she was telling me yes, that Jeh was a hunter. But she was laughing. “He is a judge, Alanna. You should have said that when he was here.”

I was glad I hadn’t. There would be time enough for me to make insulting errors. “Judges are higher than hunters then?” I asked.

“Higher, yes. From the judges come the Hao.”

“Hao?”

“You saw Diut last night—one of our Tehkohn Hao.”

“The blue man?”

“So. We have one other, Tahneh, but she is old.”

“And these are your leaders, Diut and Tahneh?”

“More than leaders. Judges can lead, or hunters. But when they do, there is dissension, sometimes fighting. It happened that way with the Garkohn because their Hao died childless and no judges had produced a new Hao from the air.”

“From the…”

“The Hao come either from other Hao, or from nowhere into the families of judges. Never from hunters or nonfighters. The Garkohn have thrown away their only source of the blue. Now, without unity or honor or power, they will die slowly.”

The mention of dying sent my thoughts off in another direction. “Cheah?”

She looked at me in a way that seemed friendly.

“The Garkohn here, and the other Missionaries—are any of them still alive?”

“None,” she said quietly. “Only you.”

I lowered my head, realizing that this was the answer that I had expected. I could remember now crawling from corpse to corpse near the end of my withdrawal, groping blindly, hoping to find someone alive. But I had been alone even then. Now I looked up at Cheah’s furry face and knew that I was still alone. Flexible as I was, how could I hope to blend in among these people. At least among the Missionaries, there had been others who looked almost like me. But here…

I found myself suddenly longing to see another furless Earth-human face,. I hadn’t even liked any of the Missionaries who had been captured with me but if one of them had been brought in to me now, alive, I would have welcomed him, as the Missionaries said, like a brother.

“Alanna.”

I made my eyes focus on Cheah.

“What are you thinking? That you are alone now because the others are dead?”

I did not answer.

“You are,” she continued. “And being alone among a strange people is hard. But you are clean now, and we want you with us. Why should we be a strange people to you any longer. Learn. Become one of us.”

“Shall I grow fur then? Or turn green?” I was feeling just bitter enough to be foolish. I was thinking that in the end, I would have to make do with the bleak satisfaction of revenge after all. And even that offered less attraction than it once had. I found Cheah likable. She reminded me of Gehl.

“You will do whatever you can do,” she said quietly. “Were you

lying when you told Jeh you would learn?"

"I…no."

"Learn then. Don't use your differences to isolate yourself. If we are not offended by them, why should you worry?"

She was right, of course. And though that didn't stop me from worrying, it did help.

I regained my strength quickly and stayed with Jeh and Cheah for many days. I learned as much of the language as I could from both of them. Tehkohn and Garkohn were similar, derived from the same root language, and sometimes I mixed the two, strangely forgetting which was which. But I struggled to learn.

"Your Garkohn is offensive," Jeh had told me. "We are your people now. You must learn to speak as we do."

I did my best to obey. I was still learning when Jeh and Cheah suddenly turned me over to a pair of artisans.

"Learn from them," Jeh said. "We have seen that you can learn, and that you will. The artisans will teach you more."

"I'll live with them?"

"Yes. And help them in their work."

I looked away from him frowning, not wanting to leave. I knew it was a good sign that they were sending me to artisans. Artisans cared for the young children of the tribe. Jeh and Cheah had two sons who spent most of their time with their artisan second-parents. And I, in my ignorance of Tehkohn ways, was like a child. But still, I had grown secure with Jeh and Cheah. They were not like Jules and Neila at all except in their acceptance of me, but that was enough. Since I had to stay with the Tehkohn, I would have preferred to go on living with these two.

Yet I said nothing. I was being favored, trusted. Silence was best no matter what I felt. Jeh took me to the apartment of the artisan couple and left me there. The artisans were Gehnahteh, a slender golden-green woman, and her husband Choh, who had slightly more yellow in his coloring.

These two walked up to me without a word and began to undress me. I resisted without thinking at first as they seized my short, fur-lined tunic and my pants. Jeh had only recently taken me to another artisan to have the clothing made. That had been my first experience with being stripped by an artisan. But at least that artisan had had good reason for what she did. She had taken away the skin blanket that I had wrapped myself in and looked at me and measured me with knotted strips of hide and listened while I described the garments I needed. I hadn't minded. But I did mind this sudden unnecessary stripping by Gehnahteh and Choh. After a moment, I stepped away from them and finished undressing myself so that they could satisfy

their curiosity and leave me alone.

They did not touch me as I stood naked before them. They looked at me. They walked around me, staring at my body while I stared back angrily. I was used to Kohn curiosity, abruptness, and lack of privacy by then, and normally, it didn't bother me. But this time Gehnahteh and Choh had taken me by surprise, and had unwittingly come into conflict with my own wildland habits. Wild humans who were seized unexpectedly, suddenly, by strangers fought for their lives. It was an automatic reaction. I had grabbed Choh and very nearly hit him before I caught myself. But with Gehnahteh's first words, my anger began to die.

"Do the skins keep you warm enough?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You need nothing more?"

"Shoes," I said hopefully. But I had spoken in English. I translated. "Coverings for my feet to protect them from the rocks outside." The Missionaries had taught me to wear shoes because, as they said, only animals and savages went without them. To please Jules and Neila, I had tolerated them, had slowly become used to them. I had even stopped taking them off when I was out of their sight. That was why I had had them on when I was captured. But somehow, in the prison room, the cleansing room, I had lost them. Apparently, they had been cleared away with the sand that had covered the floor. Jeh and Cheah had brought me three pair from the Missionary corpses, but all of them were too small. I had not cared enough to ask to have others made at first, but after one trip outside with Cheah, one trip down to the little mountain valley where the Tehkohn grew their crops, I knew my feet would need protection.

Choh stepped to my side, bent, and lifted one of my feet as though he was a Missionary examining the foot of a horse.

I grabbed a handful of his fur to keep from falling. He didn't seem to mind. He probed my foot with a hard hand, then let me go.

"Her feet are not as hard as ours," he told Gehnahteh.

"Best to give her the coverings then," said Gehnahteh. "We cannot use her if she is lame."

"Coverings as though she was already lame?"

"Yes."

Choh took me to an artisan whom I had not met before. He looked at my feet and felt them, then spoke to Choh in Tehkohn too rapid for me to follow. Choh gestured toward me and the artisan looked at me and spoke again, very quickly.

I frowned, not understanding enough to answer.

"Speak slowly," said Choh. "She's just learning our language."

The artisan spoke slowly, simply. "Do you have pain in any part

of your feet now?"

"No."

"It's only the softness that you want protected then."

"Yes." Softness! The Missionaries said my feet were like hooves.

The artisan flashed white and turned away from us back to a piece of leather that he had been cutting when we entered his apartment. Choh and I left him at his work.

Choh showed me around the nonfighter section of the huge mountainlike building that was the Tehkohn dwelling. The dwelling mimicked the mountains around it in its interior as well as its exterior. The rough stone corridors were much like caves except for their random patches of luminescent material. There were deep, wide cisterns of clear water so that the people did not have to haul water up from the river in the Tehkohn valley below. There were deliberately deceptive corridors that led nowhere and that ended abruptly at stone walls against which invaders could be trapped. Some corridors wound higher or lower into other parts of the dwelling, and some led us around the nonfighter section and back to our starting place. Some corridors were not meant to be noticed. Entrances to these were formed by careful overlapping of the stone walls. The overlapping made the entrances completely invisible from one direction. From the opposite direction in the dim light, I found that I could see only what looked like one more irregularity in a rough irregular wall. Until Choh opened the hidden door.

"There was much fighting here once," he told me. "Our ancestors built a dwelling that could help them in their fighting. Then, from here, they made the Kohn people. They drew together warring tribes and ruled them for generations.

"Do the Tehkohn still rule other tribes?"

"No, no longer. We had too many ties—people spread over too much territory. One by one, the ties were broken. The people made themselves separate tribes again. But through all that, this dwelling has protected us, fighter and nonfighter."

I turned to look at him. His head reached just above my elbow, and his slenderness made him look more like a young boy than a man. He and his wife looked like adolescents together, yet Jeh had told me that these two had an adolescent son—a boy in the midst of his first liaison.

Artisans and farmers were naturally small people, members of a race different from those of the stocky hunters and the tall lean judges.

"Did artisans build this dwelling?" I asked Choh.

He glanced up at me and his body whitened. "Yes. The Hao came to them—to my ancestors—and said, 'Build us a home that will help

us fight by concealing itself as we do.' And for the time it took to build this dwelling, artisans ruled. Others obeyed them—hunters, judges, even the Hao listened when artisans spoke. And when the building was finished, the Hao looked at it and saw that there was greater value in nonfighting people than they had thought."

He had a low quiet way of speaking that I liked, and he was at ease with me now that his curiosity about my differences had been satisfied. I began to think that my stay with him and Gehnahteh would not be as bad as I had feared.

After the general tour, Choh took me to the heavily draped doorways of three apartments. These were visible doorways with only the hides of animals serving as doors. Hidden doors of stone and metal were used only for special purposes. Choh stopped at each of these doorways and called out a name. He introduced me first to a hunter, then to a pair of judges, then to a pair of farmers who were just leaving their apartment. These were the trade families of Gehnahteh and Choh. They performed special services for each other and considered themselves to be related as though by blood. Now I was part of their group. From now on, the hunter—he was a widower—would supply Choh's artisan friend with leather for my shoes.

Choh made me guide him once to each of these three apartments. When he saw that I knew the way, he took me down to a lower level of the dwelling where wood had been cut and stored in great piles. There were wooden handcarts there much like the Missionaries' carts. I was surprised because the Garkohn did not use such things in their dwelling or even on their trails through the meklah-tangled valley.

"Load a cart," Choh told me. "Take one load of wood to each of the three apartments, and to our apartment. When you have finished, leave the cart here, and come home."

He turned and left me. And I did my work, and went home.

Thus began my life as a Tehkohn—a life of working and learning through my work. I ran errands for Gehnahteh and Choh. I learned to cook Tehkohn foods over the fire in the fireplace of their apartment. I learned to clean the apartment with a soap made from the roots of one of the mountain plants. I learned to make the soap and the brushes I used. I was loaned to the trade-family farmers to help with the planting. The farmers put me to work with the adolescent children who were breaking up clods of earth while the adults plowed with a tool that looked like a long narrow version of an Earth-made shovel. The tool had a strong wooden handle and a flat narrow metal head that tapered to a point. On one side of each handle, down near the metal, there was a footrest that the farmers used to push the metal deep into the ground. My farmers watched me for a half day, then gave me a shovel.

Their main crop was a kind of tuber that they ate in some form with almost every meal—their nonaddictive version of the meklah. They also raised a small sweet melon, sweet berries, other fruit, and at least three kinds of bean or pea that grew in pods underground. They had no domestic animals. The native animals would not breed in captivity. Usually, they sickened and died soon after they were caught. The Tehkohn simply did what they could to insure a plentiful supply of wild game. They killed off all the non-Tehkohn predators they could, and they diverted rivers and streams to irrigate the territory around them more evenly and make it lush for the plant eaters. Then the hunters killed as much game as they could when they could, and preserved large amounts of it. Both they and the farmers were skillful. The people did not go hungry.

All the Tehkohn were skillful. They were absorbing me. They kept me working harder than I had ever worked with the Missionaries, and when I was not working, I was either learning or sleeping. There seemed to be no time for anything else. Gehnahteh and Choh made sure there was no time.

I felt myself slipping away not only from the Missionaries, but from the wilds. The wild human within me who watched and cautioned and alerted me, who kept me ready to do and be whatever I had to do and be to survive, was becoming Tehkohn. Too Tehkohn. If the Tehkohn had not been so different physically, that might not have been a bad thing. I had found more acceptance among them in my short time with them than I had in more than three years with the Missionaries. But I could not spend my life among people so alien, no matter how accepting they were. Now and then, in spite of the work, I found myself still longing to see another Missionary. Furless skin, black or white or brown. I spoke aloud to myself in English and it sounded strange to me. I began to resent the Tehkohn, their work, their customs. I grew careless. There was one night in particular…

I was not yet used to the cooking and I had an accident. I had cooked over an open fire for most of my life, but it had been a haphazard kind of cooking. I had never had a heavy kettle to contend with. I burned myself, and in sharp reaction, dumped most of the stew into the fire.

Gehnahteh said several Tehkohn words that I had never heard before and seized a stick of firewood. Her body flared angry yellow as she hit me once, twice. I scrambled away from her more startled than hurt.

She followed me, beating me across the back and ribs, hitting the arm I held up to protect my head. The blows were jarring and painful, but strangely, I did not want to hit back if I could avoid it. I wasn't afraid, or even angry. I was annoyed—and much aware of

Gehnahteh's smallness. Surely, I could handle this one furious little artisan—whom I happened to like—without hurting her.

Finally, I seized her arm, wrenched the stick away from her, and threw it into the half-smothered fire. Then I caught her by the throat, shook her once warningly, and let her go. She stumbled back from me and we stood glaring at each other. Choh, watching us, had stood up, but he had not had time to interfere. Now he stood looking at me uncertainly. In that moment, I knew I could kill them both if I wanted to. I couldn't get away with it, but I could do it. They were small and strong and I was large and stronger. Also, untrained as I was in the ways of their hunters and judges, I was still what they would call a fighter.

The knowledge gave me a security I had not had since my capture. I relaxed. Without a word, I took a basket from beside the door and went down to one of the storage rooms for more tubers, vegetables, and dried meat. I cleaned the kettle and cleaned the mess out of the fireplace, and I made more stew.

Nothing was said about the incident, but neither Gehnahteh nor Choh ever tried to beat me again. I began to refuse work when I didn't want it. Not often, but when I was tired. The first time I did it, Gehnahteh swore at me. I sat listening until she finished and went away. After that, she and Choh began to ask me to do things instead of telling me. They had handled young fighters before—had been second-parents to several. They understood what was happening better than I did.

Neila Verrick had gotten as close a look at the Tehkohn Hao as she wanted before the prisoners were locked up. As soon as she realized that Jules intended to have him brought to the cabin, she retreated next door to wait with the neighbors.

Alanna had not risked suggesting such a private meeting with Diut. That was something Jules had thought of himself. The only alternative was to meet in the storehouse where the prisoners were being kept—meet surrounded by other Tehkohn and watched by Garkohn guards. Apparently, Jules had decided that even being alone with the largest and least human-looking Tehkohn was preferable to that.

He had had some difficulty persuading the Garkohn to bring Diut to the cabin. And once they had brought him, they did not want to leave him there alone with Jules and Alanna. But finally, Jules persuaded them to go.

Alanna watched them very carefully as they filed out. Neila had lit two lamps in the main room before she left, but there were still areas of shadow, places where skillful Garkohn could conceal

themselves almost invisibly. There must be no chance of the conversation Jules and Diut were about to have being overheard. Apparently Diut was checking too. It was he who spotted the intruder first—and again, the intruder was Gehl. But this time her camouflage was excellent. Diut's coloring yellowed minutely when he saw her and Alanna, every sense alert, spotted the change. Only then did she see Gehl.

Diut spoke softly. "Huntress, your kind and I have respected each other until now."

Gehl dropped her camouflage. "You are a prisoner," she said.

"So," admitted Diut.

There was yellow in Gehl's coloring. Alanna wondered what it signified in her—anger or fear. "I'm one of your captors," said Gehl. "Do you think you can command me as you do your Tehkohn?"

"Have I commanded you?"

Gehl flared pure yellow. "I will stay here as long as you are here."

"No."

"You cannot say…"

"Now you ask to be commanded. You will wait outside until I have spoken with the Missionaries," Diut's blue became luminescent. "Obey!"

For a long moment, the huntress faced him, not quite challenging, not quite giving way. She gazed into his blue and Alanna knew she was at war with her own instincts. This was only a small thing that Diut wanted. It would be so easy to obey. And what harm could it do? The house was surrounded by Garkohn. Finally, her instincts won. She turned and left.

Relief flooded Alanna. She knew, though Jules did not, how easily the confrontation might have ended in Gehl's death and immediate trouble with the Garkohn. But it was over.

Diut now made himself as unimpressive as he could. He muted his coloring so that his face and body seemed to be veiled in shadow. He had kept it that way—quietly unobtrusive—through most of the trip down from the mountains. His height, well over two meters, made him a giant among both Missionaries and Kohn. That he could not disguise. There were two or three Missionaries almost as tall, but so large a native, especially a Tehkohn, had to be startling and threatening to the colonists. Facing Jules now, Diut seemed to understand this. He sat down as soon as he could. He was not so much trying to avoid alarming Jules, Alanna knew, although his general "dimming" would have that effect. He was trying to see that attention would be focused on the subject at hand rather than on his rank and his—to Jules's mind—unusual physical appearance. He did this with his judges when he needed opinions from them that were honest

rather than “respectful.” Jules would not understand the sign, but he would respond to it in the way Diut wanted.

Seeing Diut take such care, Alanna relaxed slightly. She felt more confident now that she had done the right thing in urging this meeting.

They sat at the dining table, and Diut stared at the bowl of meklah fruit that Alanna had forgotten to remove. He had glanced briefly at Jules, then at Alanna. Neither glance was significant. It simply acknowledged their presence. Jules spoke to him in Garkohn to Alanna’s surprise. She realized that Jules must have learned the language during her absence. During that same period, she had taught Diut English, but there was no need for Jules to know that.

“My daughter has told me a little about you, Tehkohn Hao,” Jules said. “Not much. But enough with what I’ve just seen, to make me wonder why you’re here. What do you want?”

Diut raised his large head and gave Jules his attention. This was disconcerting in spite of the shadows he cast about himself. Diut was the only Kohn Alanna had seen who managed, in spite of the humanoid arrangement of his features, to seem frighteningly alien. No Missionary would see him as simply a caricature of the Sacred Image. Alanna saw Jules jump, saw him sit up straighter in his chair. But he continued to look at Diut.

“Perhaps only to find out whether you would be able to ask that question,” Diut said. His voice had depth without hollowness or harshness. It was clear, but somehow, not pleasing, not human. Like his appearance, it took getting used to. “To see whether the Garkohn would let you,” he continued, “and whether you would bother.”

It was an admission! Alanna stared down at the table, her expression carefully neutral. Just as she had guessed, Diut had come to see whether the Missionaries were worth the trouble it would cost him to let them live.

“I bothered,” said Jules, “because I want the hostilities between your people and mine to end now before there is more killing. As for the Garkohn, their authority is over their own people. They don’t give orders here at the Mission settlement.”

“So?” Diut watched Jules silently for a moment. “Do we not discuss matters too important to be obscured by ritual lying, Missionary?”

Jules looked startled. Then he leaned back and sighed. He seemed resigned rather than offended. “You’ve come to understand our situation here very quickly.”

“I’m still learning. Just before you sent for me, for instance, I learned that you rather than Natahk planned the raid in which I was captured.”

Pride burned for a moment in Jules's eyes. "My people were going to be involved. I had none that I could afford to lose."

"Neither had I," said Diut. "Yet from your point of view, it was a highly successful raid."

"As was yours two years ago. I hope, Tehkohn Hao, that we can make this the last such hostility between our peoples."

"Peace, Verrick?" Diut reached out and took a meklah fruit from the bowl. He held it before him—between them. "And what of the Garkohn? What if we two sit here and decide not to fight each other again? How would you stop Natahk when he next decides to use your people?" As he spoke, he replaced the fruit in its bowl. During the instant that the bowl completely hid his hand from Jules, that hand was the same brown as Alanna's own skin. Alanna understood the sign, realized that he knew of her readdiction. And did he condemn her, she wondered. She found herself examining his coloring for any trace of yellow disapproval. She found none. Perhaps he felt none. But he could hide his feelings when he wanted to.

Oblivious to the exchange, Jules answered Diut's question. "Things are bad, Tehkohn Hao, but not as bad as that. We were not simply used by Natahk. We helped him willingly. I had been losing people steadily for two years and I was convinced that you were responsible."

"And do you know now that I was not?"

Jules glanced at Alanna. "My daughter has told me that you were not. I believe that she reports the truth as she has been allowed to see it. But I find it hard to believe that she has not been deceived in some way."

Diut said nothing for several seconds. Jules sat glaring at him, waiting impatiently for his defense. Finally, Diut spoke. "Do you understand the way we group ourselves, Verrick—our clans?"

"Clans? Yes, I understand, but what have they to do with—"

"Farmer, artisan, hunter, judge, and Hao. Five. The Garkohn are only three."

"Yes?" Jules was frowning.

"The Garkohn Hao died years ago—I hope from the wounds given to him by my people. The Garkohn have twice as many people as the Tehkohn, but they have never had as much of the blue. The Garkohn Hao had been childless, and the Garkohn judges did not produce another Hao child. As it often happens when people have no Hao to unite them, the Garkohn fought among themselves. The hunters rebelled against the judges' rule and killed the judges. Now the hunters rule themselves—badly. They had almost ceased to be a threat to us until Natahk gained power, and until your people arrived, Verrick."

"But we haven't helped the Garkohn until now," protested Jules.

"You've helped them. Their artisans are even relearning the shaping of metal because of you."

"But we haven't shown them!"

Diut only looked at him.

After a while, Jules nodded. "I see. I knew they watched us, though I didn't think that was the reason—or one of the reasons."

"You help them in another way also."

"How?"

"Your people know many things. Things that the ancestors of the Garkohn knew—things that the Tehkohn still know. And yet you are crippled. You cannot conceal yourselves. You cannot see what is in front of you. You fight badly…"

"We fought well enough against you to win!"

"You *fought* hardly at all, Verrick, and you know it."

Jules glared at him angrily, but to Alanna's surprise, he did not deny the charge.

"Natahk gave you information and you shaped it into a plan. Your part in that plan was to make noise, kill a few unwary farmers, and lure my fighters down from the upper levels of the dwelling to the floor of our valley where they could be killed more easily. You made your noise, and it was new and terrifying to my people. But when my fighters arrived, you had to be protected by Garkohn hunters."

Jules was quietly furious. "We let them protect us so that we wouldn't shoot them by accident, mistaking them for Tehkohn. Your people were not hurt nearly as badly as we could have hurt them—as we might still have to hurt them."

"Threats, Verrick? Even as we talk of peace?"

With an effort, Jules controlled himself. "You are here to talk peace. Why do you talk of fighting instead?"

"Because you must understand what you are—why you are of value to Natahk. You can think, but you cannot fight. You are judges to whom hunters need not be subject. There are few traditions to protect you because you have no blue."

"We are human beings! We…"

"You are Garkohn now in Natahk's eyes. Your people were stolen to make you Garkohn. Look for them at the Garkohn farming town where they form the tie that joins you to Natahk."

Slowly, Jules's expression changed from indignation to comprehension. "Do you mean they're hostages? Does Natahk intend to use them to force us to obey him?"

"That would be unnecessary. You obey him now. The tie is custom. Two peoples are not truly united without it. You might find it distasteful custom though." He gestured toward Alanna. "This one has

told me of your beliefs."

"What are you saying?" demanded Jules.

"That Garkohn-Missionary children exist now. That more will be born."

There. It was out. Alanna waited for Jules's reaction. It came, explosively, a shouted jumble. Alanna recognized some of the milder arguments. That it was not possible. That the differences between Kohn and human were too great… They were the same arguments that she had repeated to herself when she realized she was carrying Diut's child.

She was glad she had been open with Diut, had told him just how strong the Missionary prejudice was. Now he was hearing it again much more vehemently from Jules. He was hearing that he was an animal, and he seemed more amused than angry. His coloring whitened slightly. Then he seemed to become bored with the tirade. He stood up and looked around the cabin. Near the fireplace, Jules's ax leaned against the wall. Diut walked to it, picked it up, and examined its double-edged steel head.

Jules had fallen silent the moment Diut left his chair. Now he watched warily as Diut handled the ax. He probably knew that Diut needed no weapon to kill him. Most Kohn fighting was weaponless, in fact. Fighters leaped on each other from camouflage. Weapons made their camouflage less effective. Nevertheless, the sight of the Tehkohn Hao armed with an ax was undoubtedly terrifying. Alanna watched Jules, hoping that he would not give way to his fear.

And Jules watched Diut until Diut put the ax back in its place. Jules did not sigh with relief then, but his hands did loosen their convulsive grip on the table. Diut returned to his seat.

"Your artisans know their craft," he said quietly. "There are things you could teach even us about the working of metal." It was the first overture of anything resembling friendliness that he had made, but Jules was in no frame of mind to notice it.

"I can't believe the kind of crossbreeding you're talking about is possible," said Jules. "I must have proof."

"Ask Natahk for it. Perhaps he will give it to you now while he is still drank with his victory. What will you do if he does?"

Jules looked stubborn, said nothing.

"Or perhaps it would be better if you did not ask him. He has shown surprising gentleness in his handling of you so far. As long as you obey him, you are left alone to live as you wish. He does not have to waste large numbers of his hunters controlling you and you have at least the illusion of freedom. You might be more comfortable holding on to that illusion."

Jules could not have missed the scorn in his voice. It seemed to

bring back his reason. He spoke quietly. “Is it beyond your understanding, Tehkohn Hao, that I have borne this humiliation to keep my people alive?”

“And are you ready now to watch them die?”

“I would rather watch them die than see them stripped of their humanity.”

“So? And what of those who have already been…stripped?”

“No true Missionary could ever submit to such a—”

“I am weary of your raving, Verrick!” He paused as though daring Jules to speak. When Jules did not, he went on. “I will explain what I should not have to explain. Your people are all meklah slaves. When they hunger enough, when their pain is great enough, there is no price they will no; pay for the meklah poison. Do you understand me?”

There were several seconds of silence. Then Jules answered softly. “Yes.”

“And do you accept what I say as truth?”

There was another long silence. Alanna watched Jules, hoping that he would give an honest answer even if that answer was “no.” A “no” would disgust Diut, but he had reason to be patient. He would try again. But if Jules said “yes,” and lied, it would take Diut no time at all to realize that he was lying—again. At that point, Diut might give up on (he Missionaries altogether. Jules answered finally, his voice flat, dead.

“Yes. I believe you.”

“Then there will be no more talk of animals.” There was an edge to Diut’s voice. Apparently, he had not been as completely tolerant of Jules’s insults as he had seemed.

Jules nodded dumbly.

Now Alanna spoke up, asked the question Jules seemed too beaten to ask. “Is there a way out of this for the Missionaries, Tehkohn Hao?”

Diut glanced at her, then turned back to Jules. “Is that what you want, Verrick? A way out?”

“If one exists…”

“There might be one. But you must convince me first that it is truly what you want—that you would be willing to abandon the Garkohn if I opened a way. And you should know exactly what you run from.”

“From the Garkohn…”

“Wait. You should know that Natahk has probably already taken as many of your people as he needs for the tie. The union of tribes can be mostly ceremonial. They need not live together nor continue to intermarry. In your case, the Garkohn would probably not want much intermarriage. Your physical differences would be more a hindrance

than a help to their way of life. Natahk will continue to let you live as you wish as long as you obey the few commands he gives."

"Could you ask your people to live under such conditions, Tehkohn Hao?"

Diut flashed negative yellow. "But I have both personal and tribal reasons for hating the Garkohn," he said. "We are old enemies. You are their ally. You would benefit as much from their protection as they would from your knowledge."

"You said my daughter had told you of our beliefs," said Jules. "If you understood her, you must realize that there is no way that I could ask my people to consider themselves subjects of Natahk."

"Have not your own beliefs changed as we have talked?"

"Not enough to make me willing to become Garkohn." He looked hard at Diut. "You may not understand me, Tehkohn Hao, but my people gave up their homework! for their beliefs. If now they had to give up those beliefs as well, they would have nothing left. They would be destroyed."

Diut flashed white approval. "That is what I thought you might say. But I had to hear it. I had to see that you were not already too much absorbed into the Garkohn to have the will to save yourselves." He leaned back in his chair and relaxed. His coloring returned to its normal blue without concealing shadows. Jules stared into the blue as though seeing Diut for the first time. Diut's shadows lulled people as they were intended to. Even his quick conversational color changes did not disturb the relaxed mood the shadows encouraged. He wove a spell of normalcy, and then shattered that spell simply by relaxing and permitting his body to emphasize his lack of normalcy. Diut spoke quietly.

"I don't envy you your work, Verrick. I hope you know your people. I hope their beliefs are as strong as you say they are. Because there is a price on the freedom you want."

"What price?"

"The only way for your people to escape Natahk is to do what he would not risk doing for any long period. They must leave the valley."

Jules nodded. "That's exactly what I want them to do. We would already have done it if we had thought we had any chance of escaping Natahk."

"Natahk will let you go as soon as he is busy enough with other matters. He is not your problem. Your problem is the meklah."

"But…surely there are other places where the meklah grows."

"So. It grows beyond the eastern mountains in the jungle. With it there are savage animals, diseases, and people far more deadly than the Garkohn. You would be better here. You would be better dead."

"Nowhere else?"

Diut laid his hands flat on the table. “Not enough. To the south, beyond the Garkohn farming town and beyond the mountains, there is water. A lake as wide and twice as long as this valley. To the west, beyond our mountains, there is a desert and the sea. I have been to that country myself and seen that even the people who live there have difficulty surviving. The only direction open to you is north. Once you cross the mountains, the land is as flat as this valley, but it is higher. Meklah trees grow only sparsely there. They keep low to the ground and bear little fruit.”

“But we can use the leaves,” said Jules, “and the new roots.”

“You can. But to put yourselves beyond the reach of the Garkohn, you must go as far north as you can before you settle. The farther north you go, the less meklah there is. The country is good. There is game and other safer edible plants, and perhaps your own crops will grow. Only the meklah is missing.”

“And without it, we’ll die. I don’t think we can afford to go as far north as you believe we should, Tehkohn Hao.”

“Your daughter lived for two years without the meklah.”

“While how many others of my people died?”

“All those that the Garkohn could influence.”

“What?”

Diut turned toward Alanna. “Tell him.”

Alanna had deliberately said almost nothing. Knowing, as she did, that Diut would not hurt Jules, she had kept safely silent. She had depended on Jules’s reasonableness to win him over when he understood the threat. But now Diut wanted her co-operation and she had to give it—however carefully. She spoke to Jules in her unpracticed Garkohn so that Jules would expect Diut to understand her.

“The Garkohn prepared us all to die,” she said bitterly. “When we arrived at the Tehkohn dwelling two years ago, we were all, Garkohn and Missionary, shut in one large room together without meklah. We were given food and water, and we were left alone. At once, the least blue of the Garkohn asked to die. We Missionaries were told that it was their right to demand a quick, relatively painless death at the hands of those bluer than themselves.

“We watched while they were killed, their necks broken. Then the surviving Garkohn told us how we were to die—what being deprived of the meklah would do to us. After watching so many Garkohn die voluntarily, we believed them. At least, we believed that was how they were going to die. We hoped we were different enough physically to survive. As it happened, though, two of us were the first to go into convulsions. Those two got worse and more of us sickened. In a matter of hours, everybody but me was certain that the Garkohn were right.

They all sat around waiting to die. Eventually, they died."

"And you lived," said Jules. "Why?"

"I think…because I wanted to." She had known it would sound foolish. Abruptly, she switched to English. "The others were ready to die, Jules. They were convinced that they were in the hands of animals who would murder them. They were completely cut off from the settlement, and they knew they wouldn't be able to find their way back to it without Garkohn help. And the Garkohn were lying around waiting to die."

"What were you doing?"

Alanna switched back to Garkohn. "I was looking for a door." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Diut whiten slightly with amusement. She explained to Jules.

"The few doors that exist in the Tehkohn dwelling are concealed. This door was so well concealed that the room seemed to be just a rough-hewn bubble in solid stone. I could not even see where the fresh air was coming from. I tried to remember which way the Tehkohn had gone when they left, but the room was circular and empty except for us. The wall looked the same all the way around—rough stone. So I went around the room again and again, feeling the wall, looking at it. But by the time I found the door and got it open…"

"Wasn't it fastened shut somehow?"

"No. Only hidden. By the time I got it open, I was too sick to do anything but fall through it."

"What had you intended to do?"

"Get out of the dwelling if I could. Kill some Tehkohn before I died if I couldn't."

Jules threw a startled glance at Diut but Diut continued to show white amusement—and perhaps admiration. Alanna knew that she had first attracted his attention simply by surviving withdrawal. She went on.

"A couple of Tehkohn found me lying half in and half out of the doorway. They threw me back in and shut the door. I tried to memorize their faces so I could kill them later. In my mind, I was in the wilds again, Jules. Things were very simple. I would live so that I could kill those two Tehkohn—at least those two."

"But, of course, you didn't…?"

"No." They had become her best friends, in fact. "But I lived."

"Most of my people also live through the wanting," said Diut. "Of those whom the Garkohn addict, many escape. If they can get back to the mountains, back to their families, back to where they have a reason to live, most live. The ones who die are usually those who have been tortured, or those who have been forced to do things they cannot live with."

"I suspect that that may already have happened to most of my abducted people even without withdrawal," said Jules.

"Do you mean that you think they're dead?"

"Yes."

Diut yellowed apologetically. "From what I have heard, Verrick, they are all alive. They have submitted."

Jules glared at Diut, then shook his head. "You were saying…" He had to stop and start again. "You were saying that we could survive withdrawal if we were prepared for it. If we wanted…to live badly enough."

"Most of you should survive."

"Should."

"Unless you want to stay within easy range of the Garkohn and have them come after you someday to kill you or bring you back, you have no choice. You must begin withdrawing your people. Let the strong try—the healthy adults—so that the weak can share what little meklah you find in the north."

"No," said Jules thoughtfully. "We have one other choice. Our doctor…" He stopped, realizing that he had used the English word, and groped for a Garkohn equivalent. "One who cures disease?"

"A healer," supplied Diut in Garkohn.

"Yes. Perhaps he can find a way to make withdrawal easier, less dangerous."

"There is no easier way. My healers have sought one for generations and failed to find it. You must begin withdrawing your people now."

Jules looked hard at Diut. "*Must* begin?"

"The disturbance that will occupy the Garkohn and allow you to escape will come soon. You must be ready to leave."

Jules was no more accustomed to being commanded than was Diut. Abruptly, he had had enough. "I won't order my people to commit suicide, Tehkohn Hao. We don't know enough about meklah withdrawal. Until we do, until our…healer has found a safe way for us to withdraw, we'll remain as we are. And we'll remain here. We won't go north until I can see that we'll have some chance of surviving there."

Diut was silent for a moment. Then he spoke softly. "I thought we understood each other, Verrick."

"So did I. But you don't seem to realize what you're asking me to do to my people. I'm willing to go north—eager to go as soon as it's safe."

"They are your people, Verrick." Diut's tone was deceptively gentle. Alanna spoke up urgently.

"Tehkohn Hao, his ways are different. He doesn't realize…" She

stopped at Diut's yellow flash of annoyance. Diut went on speaking to Jules.

"You have the right to make decisions for them."

Diut's resignation and Alanna's obvious alarm seemed to reach Jules. "And you think I have made a bad decision," he said, "even though I made it to save my people's lives."

Diut leaned forward, his forearms on the table. "I have told you the only way to save their lives. I have spoken to you as I would speak to the leader of another Kohn tribe. But perhaps as your daughter says, your ways are different. You don't understand. Listen then. I blame the Garkohn for the trouble between us. You have been lied to and used. But even so, I cannot afford to have your people remain here and be used again. And they would be used again, with your consent or without it. I admit that you and the Garkohn together are a formidable combination. But you must admit what a childishly vulnerable people your Missionaries are alone. Do you understand me now?"

Jules looked surprised. Clearly, he did understand. "I only wanted a little time," he said.

"You will have some time. I cannot say how much. Do whatever you wish with it. Begin to withdraw your people at once, or wait and hope that if your healer does find his cure, there will still be Missionaries left alive to use it."

Jules spoke low, as though to himself. "Am I to tell my people then that if, while they are writhing in agony, they can think in a positive enough manner, they *might* survive?" He shook his head. "We are doomed if you force this on us. Your people might save themselves the task of murdering us outright, Tehkohn Hao, but they will be killing us just the same."

Diut rose, walked around the table to Jules. Jules, his expression uncertain, also stood up. They faced each other and Jules, who had never seemed small or slight to Alanna, seemed so now. Diut seemed to tower over him, dwarf him not only in size, but in sheer awesome presence. Alanna's mind flickered back to an earlier time when she had fled from Diut, when she herself had called him animal and monster. Diut spoke softly.

"At this distance, Verrick, I could kill you very easily, so be still."

Taken by surprise, Jules froze, stood staring at the tall native with fear and anger.

"You could not move quickly enough, or attack strongly enough to prevent me. I am certain death. Withdrawal from the meklah is possible life. Which would you choose?"

Jules relaxed, leaned against the table. In English, he said, "All right, you bastard, you've made your point."

Diut did not react.

Jules switched languages. “Again, I understand you, Tehkohn Hao.” The sarcasm in his voice was too heavy to be missed.

“There is one more thing that must be said.” Diut spoke quietly, apparently neither taking, nor trying to give offense.

“You will find the words.”

“Natahk will ask you what was said between us. He may not ask gently. The choice of what you tell him is entirely your own. Nothing you say to him could stop my people from dealing with him. I was willing to leave the Garkohn to themselves to murder each other before this last raid, but I can no longer afford to do that. The only people you can hurt in speaking to Natahk are your own.”

Jules shrugged, deliberately turned his back, and sat down. “I understand.”

Diut did not speak for several seconds. Alanna could not tell whether he was angry or perversely admiring. His coloring remained a steady blue. He turned and spoke to her. “Your readdiction may serve some purpose now. Be the first to withdraw from the meklah. Show your people that it is possible.”

“That’s what I had planned to do.”

He looked at her for a moment longer, then turned and walked out of the door to his Garkohn and Missionary guards.

The next morning a shaken Missionary guard brought Jules word that Diut had escaped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Diut

I decided to push Alanna into a liaison with one of my judges. She had stayed with the artisans for a full season—long enough. It was time for her to be treated as the adult she was. I thought a judge would be best for her because the proportions of her body were much like those of a judge. She was tall and slender. Her bones were large, but because of her height, they did not seem so. She presented a false image of fragility. I would choose a judge for her. So.

But I chose no one. Other matters held my attention and I left Alanna with the artisans until she got into trouble. A hunter—a low hunter, but not as low as he should have been—chose to make her the victim of his frustration. Her season with the artisans probably helped him to believe that she was of no importance. Else why had she been left in subjection to others for so long? And her coloring gave her no protection. The hunter could not see her as blue enough to be dangerous to him or yellow enough to be a nonfighter whom he must not harm.

Thus, there was the foolish confrontation.

Alanna had been ordered to help the farmers down in our hidden valley. They were digging up the year's first harvest, and at the same time, sowing the seeds of the second. Alanna was carrying a large basket of ohkahs when her trouble began. She was taking them to the storerooms. The hunter, also drafted temporarily into helping with the harvest, was in a foul mood and eager to humiliate another person since he felt himself humiliated by such "low" work. As Alanna walked past him, he thrust his digging prongs between her feet.

She tripped and fell onto the rocks, scattering spilled ohkahs over a wide area. I was standing not far away talking to a pair of judges. I saw Alanna look up at the hunter and see the white in his coloring.

Her hand closed on what I first thought was a small ohkah, and she hurled it hard into his face.

The hunter shouted, fell, and did not get up. As I walked toward them, I saw blood on his face. I realized that the woman had thrown a stone not an ohkah. The hunter moaned, tried to get up, and fell back.

Another hunter was advancing on Alanna as I reached her. I spoke to him quietly.

"What do you want with her?"

Anger had driven yellow into his coloring. "Didn't you see, Tehkohn Hao? She struck Haileh with a stone, a weapon, as though he was an animal."

"I saw. And what weapon did Haileh use to provoke her?"

The hunter sputtered. "She is a foreigner! She has no right…"

"To defend herself? The lowest animal has that right. You will not interfere with her in any way."

There was a silence that I did not like and I let my coloring flare.

"I will obey, Tehkohn Hao," the man said quickly.

I turned to face Alanna and saw that though she had shown no fear of either hunter, she was afraid now. Of me. That was not surprising. I am much larger than any hunter—much larger than Alanna herself. And I am blue. Jeh had said that the blue was not important to her—that she had had to be taught to respect it. But I had other differences—Hao differences. I could not remember a time since my adolescence when there had not been people who stood before me in fear. I spoke to her in the same tone I had used on the hunter.

"Find Gehnahteh or Choh and tell them that your time with them is ended. Then go back to Jeh and Cheah."

She looked at me for a moment—seemed to force herself to look at me. Then she murmured, "Yes, Tehkohn Hao," and went away quickly.

I did not like the way she had looked at me. There had been more than fear in her eyes. There was something of the horror that I had seen in the eyes of a friend when he saw for the first time a loathsome poisonous desert animal. My differences repelled her. Her differences interested me. She was ugly almost beyond description, and yet her appearance was as natural to her as mine was to me. She wore it with assurance that was unmistakable, clearly secure in her private belief that we were the ones malformed and ugly. I in particular did not meet her standards.

I felt my coloring flow to white as these thoughts came to me, and I knew—perhaps I had known all along—that I would not choose a judge for her. Not until I had tried her assurance and her strangeness myself.

The morning after Diut escaped, Alanna came to breakfast not to eat but to talk to Jules's guest, the Mission doctor. She wanted to tell him of a possible solution to the problem of how to bring the Missionaries safely through withdrawal. She had gotten her idea from the Tehkohn, but Dr. Bartholomew wouldn't care about that. If it made sense to him, he would try it. If it didn't make sense, he would be able to tell her exactly why. She had always liked that about him, and liked him. He was practical and bluntly honest. He had made no secret of the fact that he disapproved of her at first, but she had won him over. He was one of the few Missionaries whose respect she had worked to win. But he did not arrive.

In his place came his assistant, Nathan James, a man Alanna hardly knew. Nathan was young and thin and balding. Dr. Bartholomew had thought one of the younger people should begin learning to replace him. Just before Alanna had been captured, Nathan had volunteered. But still…

"Nathan," she said, "isn't Dr. Bartholomew coming?"

Nathan stared at her, then looked at Jules, who was eating a piece of meklah bread. Alanna looked at Jules and saw that he too was startled.

"Two years," he muttered. "Of course, how could you know. And it's such old news to us that I didn't even think to tell you. The Tehkohn killed Bart, Alanna. They killed him when they took you."

"But…" Alanna frowned, disbelieving. "Last night, you told Diut…you said the doctor…"

"I meant Nathan. He's served as our doctor for the past two years. He had some teaching from Bart and he's been studying Bart's books."

"I've done the best I could," said Nathan. "I've had time enough. The Tehkohn killed my wife in that same raid."

Alanna sat down at the table and stared at Jules bleakly. Couldn't Jules hear the utter loathing in Nathan's voice when Nathan mentioned the Tehkohn? Nathan had reason to hate, of course. An irreplaceable teacher lost, a wife lost… Nathan and Ruth James had been married for less than a year. What would Nathan's reaction be to a Tehkohn idea, to an alliance with the Tehkohn, to information given by the Tehkohn Hao?

Full of misgivings, Alanna listened as Jules told Nathan of his meeting the night before with Diut. Nathan sat frowning as though he could not quite believe what he was hearing. Finally, Jules questioned him.

"Have you done any research at all on the meklah—found out anything that will help us?"

"Wait," said Nathan. "First, are you assuming that everything that

murdering Tehkohn said was true? Our people crossbreeding with… with…" His face was a twisted mask of revulsion. Alanna watched him with growing concern. Jules must have had some reason for trusting him. If that trust was misplaced, Nathan already had enough information to destroy the colony. All he had to do was give it away, deliberately or accidentally, to one of the more hotheaded Missionaries, or to any Garkohn.

"I was going to ask you for your opinion on the interbreeding too," said Jules. "I wondered whether you thought it was possible…"

"I don't!"

"But that's secondary. We have to get out of this valley, away from the Garkohn *and* the Tehkohn if we're to survive as a people. And to do that, at least some of us must break free of the meklah."

"According to the Tehkohn Hao."

"According to Diut," Jules agreed. "And frankly, I believe him."

"He must have been convincing." Nathan did not bother to keep his sarcasm out of his voice.

Jules looked annoyed. "You haven't answered my question, Nathan. The meklah."

Nathan's smugness faded. "I've done some experiments with my rabbits. I don't know what they prove. Maybe nothing. Rabbits aren't people."

"Did you withdraw the rabbits?"

"I tried."

"Well?"

Nathan shrugged. "It would have been simpler to slaughter them outright."

"You lost them? None survived?"

"Of the ones I tried to help, none survived." Nathan massaged his forehead. "I tried tapering them off the meklah slowly. They died. I tried sedating them with drugs that had already proved harmless to them while they were getting enough meklah. They died faster. By then, I knew what they were dying of and I immobilized some of them and began intravenous infusion. These died too."

"Are you sure you knew what you were doing with that last?" asked Jules.

"Frankly, no. I think I did it right. I had books and diagrams to guide me but…" He shrugged again. Jules did not press him.

"You said you knew what the rabbits were dying of," said Neila. "What was it?"

"Thirst," murmured Alanna. "Dehydration." The others looked at her.

"Yes," said Nathan. "You would know something about it, wouldn't you."

"A little," admitted Alanna.

"You should know quite a bit. You watched several Missionaries go through it."

"I watched one Missionary go through it, Nathan. Me. And most of the time I didn't even know what I was doing."

He was silent for a moment, then he nodded. "Does it bother you to talk about it, Alanna? It's awfully soon for you and I don't want to…"

"It doesn't bother me to do anything I have to do to help the people get free of that poison."

He smiled briefly, then looked apologetic. "The others…do you know how long it took them…to die?"

"No. But the Tehkohn left us shut up together for what they told me was five days. By the end of that time, everyone else was dead."

"Only five days?" said Jules.

"I don't think it took me even that long to get through it. But five days is the traditional Tehkohn cleansing period."

"But so little time…"

"You dry up," said Alanna. "You lose water in every way you can and drinking doesn't do any good because you can't keep anything down until it's over—or until you get more meklah. What you feel first though, before the thirst, is hunger, craving." She let herself remember for a moment. "I know what it's like to starve. Back on Earth, before I came to the colony, I got hungry enough to eat some things you'd probably think were pretty disgusting. But I think coming off the meklah is about the worst kind of hunger I've known." She shuddered more with apprehension than from remembering. "But it's the water loss that kills. The Tehkohn said they had seen some Garkohn die of it in only one day. Sometimes it hits them harder than it does us—hits them all at once." She looked at Nathan. "The Tehkohn have made the same experiments you have—except for the intravenous feeding. They made them on volunteers from among their own people who had been addicted by the Garkohn. I would have told you about their results if you hadn't already found out for yourself."

Nathan's calm vanished. "You *saw* Tehkohn animals making experiments?" he demanded. "You saw them using drugs to sedate each other?"

"No," said Alanna. "I heard some of them talking about it and I went to a healer to see whether or not it was true. It turned out to have happened generations ago. The healer read it to me from her grandfather's records."

"Image of God! Now you're saying they read and write as well as practice medicine."

"Yes," said Alanna quietly.

"It's impossible. They couldn't…"

"You have reason to hate them, Nathan. I don't blame you. But can you afford to underestimate them? Can any of us?"

He looked at her strangely and she met his gaze. She spoke softly. "The Tehkohn have a civilization that is hundreds of years old at least. They were once part of an empire that covered more than half of this continent. They work metal and stone and wood. They read and write. They make medicines from herbs and from the body parts of certain animals. And most important, Nathan, they only rarely die in meklah withdrawal."

"Because they have such a strong will to live," said Nathan with heavy sarcasm.

"Are you saying that the will to live isn't important?"

"Of course not. But it isn't the cure-all that your Tehkohn friends think we'll be stupid enough to believe it is. If we followed Diut's advice and depended on nothing more than will power to keep us alive, we'd be committing mass suicide." He looked at Jules. "Sounds convenient, doesn't it? We kill ourselves off, then the Tehkohn only have the Garkohn to deal with."

Nathan's voice had been rising as he spoke. Jules answered him quietly. "If that's so, Nathan, we'll need your help more than ever. We need any answer you can come up with."

Nathan closed his eyes for a moment and seemed to calm himself. Then he looked down at his plate of thin brown meklah pancakes, stared at them grimly. He reached for his cup and took a swallow of hot meklah tea. Finally he spoke, his voice low. "Jules, of the rabbits I withdrew cold, over half died. Now that's better than the figure for Alanna's prison room, but it's still nothing that either of us would like to see happen to the settlement."

"Are you saying there's no way to break free?" asked Jules.

Nathan continued staring at his plate. "No quick way, certainly."

"Shall we wait then?" said Alanna. "Shall we see whether the Garkohn can absorb us faster than the Tehkohn can kill us?"

Nathan raised his head to glare at her but it was Jules who spoke.

"What are you holding back, Lanna?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"I've seen you desperate," he said. "And you aren't now, though you'd have reason to be if things were as bad as they seemed."

She moved uncomfortably in her chair. She didn't like being read so easily. But at least it was only Jules doing the reading. "What I was holding back—in the hope that someone else would come up with it first—was an idea that may not help, but at least it will give us something else to try." She drew a deep breath. Now was her only chance to present what she knew as her own idea rather than as

Tehkohn custom. But there was hope for the Missionaries in the success the Tehkohn had had with their custom. A history of success. If only Nathan could be made to see its value and accept it. She had to take the chance.

"It's something Diut didn't tell you about because we're not a Kohn people. He probably didn't think it could be applied to us. It's the returning ceremony that the Tehkohn give one of their own who escapes from the Garkohn. They have it just before the *tehjai*…the…" She stumbled searching for the right English word. "The returnee. They have it just before the returnee is left alone for withdrawal. It's a religious ceremony really."

"A heathen ceremony, you mean," muttered Nathan.

Alanna turned to face him, looked at him silently as though waiting.

Nathan took another swallow of tea, then spoke angrily. "All right, get on with it. What do they worship? The sun? A stone idol? The Tehkohn Hao himself, perhaps?"

Only Alanna's memory of Nathan's loss and of his importance to the colony kept her from exploding at him. "The returnee is not accepted at once," she continued. "He's unclean. No one speaks aloud to him. No one touches him. The only communication with him is through a code of brightening and darkening coloring. Light signals, they call it, because some of the time they're using their natural luminescence.

"The returnee goes to the home of the First Member of his clan and his First Clansman escorts him to one of the prison rooms. Then, no matter what time of the day or night it is, the First Clansman summons the returnee's family, his friends, and Diut. With this group, he returns to the prison room and the group forms a circle around the returnee. They're all seated on the floor. One by one, each person in the circle goes before the returnee to give him some personal message of encouragement in the code. That his wife or mate awaits him, that he has proven his fighting strength by breaking free of the Garkohn, that as he has survived some other difficult struggle, he can survive withdrawal, whatever. The successes of his life are recounted; the failures aren't mentioned. When each message has been delivered, when the returnee has been reassured that his people want him back in spite of the humiliation he has undergone, the whole group begins a kind of prayer—a plea to the returnee's strength, to his power as represented by the blue in his coloring to free him from the poison and restore him to his people. If the plea was verbal, it would be a chant. It's repeated over and over, always ending with the assurance that the returnee is Tehkohn, and therefore, he will prevail.

"It goes on and on until the returnee is caught up in it. Until he is

flashing it himself, apparently without realizing what he's doing. Finally, he collapses. When that happens, the ceremony is over and the others leave quietly. I've heard that it's usually several hours before the returnee even moves."

"And then," said Nathan, "because he's had his returning ceremony, he survives. Right?"

Alanna ignored him, spoke to Jules. "It's not only the message that the circle gives, but the light signals themselves—the steady rhythmic flickering. And the circle sways as though to music. I talked my way into one of the ceremonies so that I could watch. Then I sat there bored, watching, feeling superior." She glanced at Nathan. "But after a while it started to get to me. I hadn't learned to read the light signals yet—I did later—but after a while, I couldn't keep my eyes open. I might have collapsed right along with the prisoner if I hadn't started to look away."

"Hypnosis," said Jules softly.

Alanna nodded once. "Exactly." She went on quickly before Nathan could say whatever he had his mouth open to say. "Remember how Dr. Bartholomew used it? Women had babies under it. People had dental work done, even had surgery with no anesthetic but hypnosis."

Jules looked at Nathan and Nathan was at once on the defensive. "Jules, hypnosis is no more a cure-all than having a strong will to live. It can't…"

"You do know how to use hypnosis, don't you, Nathan?" asked Jules bluntly.

"Listen to me," said Nathan. "Yes, hypnosis can ease pain sometimes. But no matter whether a person feels uncomfortable or not while he's dying, he's still dying!"

"You heard how the Tehkohn use it," said Alanna. "It's not just a pain killer. They use it to instill confidence, to give the returnee a goal and positive assurance that he can achieve it."

Jules was frowning. "Nathan, back on Earth, I read quite a bit of pre-Clayark era literature. I know that our ancestors had powerful addictive drugs, and that sometimes people became enslaved by them. What I don't know is whether hypnosis was ever used to ease their withdrawal. Was it?"

Nathan rested his elbow on the table and his head on his hand. "I don't know." He shook his head. "I haven't read anything of its being used. And I've already tried everything I have read about."

"I see." Jules spoke more gently. "Do you know anything about hypnosis, Nathan?"

"Yes. The basics are so simple…it was one of the first things Bart taught me. Then he spent the rest of the short time that was left to

him teaching me not to use it as though it was magic. I kept wanting to suppress symptoms without knowing anything about what was really wrong."

"Do you think you could hypnotize our people here?"

"Well, nearly everyone is hypnotizable to some degree, but…"

"Do you think you could hypnotize me?"

Nathan stared at him. "God, Jules, will you slow down? Are you really thinking about risking your own life?"

"This isn't something you can test on animals."

"It's not something I ought to test on the most important man in the settlement either." He appealed to the silent Neila. "Talk to him! Talk him out of this for his own sake."

Neila looked at Jules. He met her eyes for a moment, then shook his head. "You know I have to do it," he said softly. "And you know why."

"Well I don't," said Nathan. "It makes no sense! Call for volunteers. You could get almost anyone else to do it just by asking."

Jules shook his head. "It has to be me. I'm the one who's going to order the people to walk away from everything they've accomplished on this world, walk away from the drug they've become addicted to, go to an unknown land on the advice of people who've been our enemies until now and who may still be enemies… As long as I'm their leader, that's what I'm going to order them to do because I believe that's their only salvation as a people. Am I still valuable, Nathan?"

Nathan stared at him helplessly.

"But I won't even begin asking them to take those risks until I've taken the first risk myself."

"But if you die…"

"Then I die. You and Jacob [his second-in-command] can decide what to do then. You can go on with the way I've chosen, or you can try another way."

"You sound like a man trying to commit suicide," said Nathan. "And you're not going to get me to help you."

Jules shook his head. "No, I'm not trying to kill myself. But I have to withdraw. I have to do that much before I ask the people to do so much that may be suicidal."

"No!"

"Then you'll sit back and watch me withdraw without whatever help you could give."

Nathan sighed, frowned. "You don't know what you're doing. And I wish to heaven that was the worst of it." He looked directly at Jules. "You're wrong in this. You're a brave man, but you're wrong."

"Will you give me what help you can with hypnosis?"

"You know damned well I will. What else can I do? Just give me a couple of days to clear up some other things—and to check through my books. There might be something in them on pre-Clayark era drug addiction that I missed."

"Two days then," said Jules.

"I'm already in withdrawal," said Alanna quietly. She noticed that only Nathan appeared startled. Evidently Jules and Neila had guessed why she was not eating. And, of course, Jules had heard her promise to Diut the night before. "You can try hypnosis with me if you want to," she told Nathan. "I'm not asking you to, but you can try."

"But I'd want you to undergo some conditioning first," he said. He seemed almost eager. Anything to avoid making the first experiment on Jules. "You should have a few sessions with me before you withdraw so that I can give you the necessary post-hypnotic…"

"If you can't do it now, Nathan, you can't do it at all. I'm going off."

"For God's sake, will somebody in this family please be reasonable!" He looked at Jules, at Neila, at Alanna again. "What's your hurry? What are you trying to do?"

"Escape, Nathan. I don't like being a prisoner. I've developed a real dislike for anything that holds me against my will." And there was another reason. She had to be free when she saw Diut again. He had clearly demanded that much of her. He would want to move fairly quickly to free the Tehkohn captives and she was certain that he would want to see her before he freed them. But since she could not tell Nathan that, he would just have to think that she was being stubborn. "Do you want to try hypnotizing me?" she asked.

He swallowed the last of his tea and glared at her. Finally he shrugged. "I might as well. And we'd better try now before you're too far gone."

He tried—tried hard—and Alanna tried. Perhaps Alanna tried too hard. Perhaps she was simply afraid to let him have what appeared to be open access to her thoughts. She had too much to hide. He explained carefully that she would not be giving over control of herself, that she could not be influenced to do or say anything against her will. She tried to accept this, but some part of her did not believe him. She could not relax. She could not accept his suggestions.

"You will feel confident of your ability to live without the meklah," he told her over and over after going through the motions of putting her under. "You will feel no need of the drug."

And she thought, *Yes I will.*

"You will be relaxed and without pain."

No I won't.

And so on. The failure was hers rather than Nathan's. But by the

time the session was finished, she was too uncomfortable to care. She got up without a word and went to her room. Already she felt tired and hounded by the meklah products she could see and smell around her. She was not much more than normally hungry, but her memory and imagination made it seem worse. Nathan's suggestions had caused her to remember just how bad her first withdrawal had been. She considered the irony bitterly. She was probably the only person in the colony whose combination of perversity and past experience made the technique she had suggested more a hindrance than a help.

Time crawled by. She found herself thinking of Diut, feeling glad that he could not see her as she was now, as she would be shortly. When he saw her again, the ordeal would be over and he would be able to speak more than his few illegal words to her. She would be clean. Not that her situation was directly comparable to that of a Tehkohn captured by the Garkohn, and not that Diut was subject to every rule that bound other Tehkohn. He could hardly have spoken more with her before Jules anyway. But still, addiction was a shameful stigma in his culture. An addict who did not withdraw as quickly as possible could not expect to remain in favor with him. She was surprised to realize how important that had become to her—that she keep his favor. She had expected him to suffer in comparison with Missionary men—men of more human appearance. He had not. She could no longer see him as the monster he had once appeared to be.

He would return for her as well as for the Tehkohn captives. She was certain of that. And he would kill Natahk both because Natahk was too dangerous to be left alive, and for another more personal reason. As she withdrew, she would think of Natahk dying as Tien had died. Natahk, who was the reason for her past suffering and for the suffering she faced now. She would think of it while she could think.

After a while her awareness of time grew distorted. She seemed to move too quickly, or in slow motion. She lay down on her bed and before she realized it, she had fallen into a meklah dream. A bad dream this time. The nightmare of her first withdrawal.

She could feel the cold sand beneath her and hear the convulsive gagging of those Missionaries who had tried to eat the meklah-free mountain food that the Tehkohn had left them.

There were Garkohn huddled silently around the mound of their yellowed dead, waiting for their own deaths. They maintained what dignity they could until their senses left them. Then they groveled unknowingly with the Missionaries in the filth on the floor.

Alanna remembered searching for the door, finding it too late. Remembered the two Tehkohn who lifted her like a sack of grain and threw her back into the cleansing room. Remembered hatred. Remembered landing on someone who groaned and tried feebly to

crawl away. Remembered the pain of awakening once and finding her head pillowed on a yellowed Garkohn corpse. Remembered crawling away sickened, dragging herself to a Missionary man and finding him equally dead. Remembered terror and fury that she should be abandoned in such a place—she who was not dead.

The entire experience was there, replayed in seconds, or in hours. Alanna did not know which, but it held her, gripped her. It threatened to replay again and Alanna strained away from it. The present flickered before her, stable for a moment. Her bed, her room, shadowy figures nearby.

Then heavy gluey sleep sucked her away from them. Sleep held her tarlike, though she tried to waken. She could not open her eyes. She struggled, not knowing whether her struggle was physical or mental. She fought and seemed to hear animal sounds around her. Her own voice gibbering.

She awoke sweating and vomiting and choking. Her body heaved convulsively again and again and again and there were moments when she was aware of being covered with her own filth.

And there was the pain. The agony that would not stop. As though her body, having been denied the meklah, had somehow begun to consume itself.

She trembled, convulsed, trembled…

She was aware briefly of other people with her, staring at her. She felt her breath ragged, knife-edged against a throat already raw from screaming. Her voice was a mere husk of itself, her tongue dry, thick, choking. Remembered anger exploded anew within her at the one responsible for her ordeal. Natahk. The one who would pay. She could hear her own voice, a harsh whisper, cursing.

Over and over again, waves of pain, convulsions, pain…

Peace.

Someone was wiping her face with a damp cloth. She opened her eyes—was surprised to find that she could open them—and saw that it was Neila. Disoriented, she tried to think. Was it only a few moments ago that she had left her foster mother in the other room?

“How long…?” She could only mouth the words; her voice was gone. But Neila understood.

“Four days.”

Alanna closed her eyes again, not thinking about the time gone, not thinking about anything. Only enjoying the sensation of peace, the near-absence of pain.

“I have water,” said Neila, “and some broth, meklah-free. Do you think you can take it now?”

She could. Somehow she forced herself to drink slowly. She was as weak as though she had fasted for weeks, but even at that, her

condition was not as bad as it had been after her first withdrawal.

Jules came in as she was swallowing a little broth, and for some reason, Natahk was with him. Alanna could only stare her hatred at the Garkohn and wonder why he was there.

Jules said small meaningless things and managed to let her know that he was glad to see her alive. Natahk only shook his head—one of the Missionary gestures he had picked up. He spoke quietly.

"It is unthinkable that anyone should be able to do this twice." He came closer and touched her with his offensive careless intimacy. "How is it that we did not notice you before we lost you to the Tehkohn?"

She was not yet alert enough for his openness to frighten her. She only glared at him, then appealed with her eyes to Jules and Neila to get him out of her room. Natahk saw the appeal and understood it.

"You would like them to send me away? I will go soon. I only wished to see for myself that my hunters' reports of you were true." He was secure. He did not even look at Jules, who was now behind him. He spoke again, softly. "Shall I leave you as you are now, free of the meklah, the only one of your kind granted such freedom?"

She turned her face away from him, wondering furiously who had given her away. Jules? Neila? Nathan? Who had failed to notice the concealed listening Garkohn. The thought of yet another withdrawal made her sick with fear. She would readily have begged, groveled before Natahk if she had thought it would do any good. The four-day ordeal had drained her pride away. But it had not stripped her of her knowledge of the Kohn. She faced him again, carefully showing only her real anger and hatred. She managed a whisper.

"Leave me free or kill me!"

He stared at her silently for a long moment, giving no sign of his feelings. "And still you challenge," he said finally. "When you're fully recovered, Alanna, we must talk. You have much to tell me. I'm leaving now, but in a few days, I'll return with questions for you. Keep your freedom until then, and think on what you would do to keep it longer."

He turned and left the room. Jules moved so quickly to follow him that Alanna almost missed the look of cold rage on her foster father's face.

For a moment, she was aware of loud arguing from the next room. Jules's voice and Natahk's raised against each other. She did not understand what they said, nor did she care. She could not even make herself worry about Natahk's threats now that he had left her alone. She was too tired. She drifted off into much-needed sleep.

Not until noon the next day when Alanna got up—against Nathan's orders—did she begin to take a real interest in anything

outside herself. She was still weak, still hoarse. She had bruises and sore muscles, but none of that mattered. Something had happened between the Garkohn and the colonists. She had to know what it was. She found Jules sitting alone in the cabin's main room.

"It's simple," he told her. "Natahk's guards reported my meeting with Diut. Then they reported Diut's escape. Natahk connected the two and decided that I had let his prize prisoner escape."

"With all his guards looking on?"

"Oh yes," said Jules bitterly. "It was all some Tehkohn trick, you see, and I was in on it. I told him it was a lot more likely that some of his own people had let Diut get away—out of respect for the blue."

"And?"

"He lit up the room. Brightest yellow I've ever seen. I think a lot of his rage came out of his knowledge that I might be right. He questioned me about my talk with Diut. I had to tell him something so I told him Diut had accused him of kidnapping our people. He not only admitted that it was true, but he told me he had us too. Confirmed everything Diut said against him."

Alanna sighed, nodded. "Well, at least now you can be sure."

Jules went on with increasing bitterness. "He said he wanted me to understand exactly what the situation was so that I wouldn't endanger my people by following any instructions Diut had given. He said it was unfortunate that I couldn't have been content with things as they were, because now he had to take away even the limited authority that he had let me exercise over my people." Jules took a deep breath and the rage that Alanna had only glimpsed the day before was back, intensified. "My people! People I worked over half my life to save. People who trusted me! I'll kill Natahk before I let him get away with this!"

Alanna sympathized silently. But Jules's anger, like her own, would have to wait. Now the Garkohn would watch him more closely than ever, and they would be less tolerant about what they permitted him to do.

"Jules, this means you can't go through with your withdrawal."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"They'll be watching you! My God, if they found out about my withdrawal, you know they'll find out about yours."

"Possibly."

"They'll readdict you—at least. They might not even let you get all the way through. You're a lot more important to them than I am. Natahk will see your freedom as a threat to his control over the settlement."

"You might be right," he said, "but it doesn't matter. The whole idea of my withdrawing now was to test your hypnosis idea. I didn't

want to ask anyone else to serve as a guinea pig, and now, I don't want to expose anyone else to Natahk's anger if he finds out what we're doing."

She looked at him closely. He was sitting in his chair near the fireplace, his body limp, seemingly relaxed, his hands first clasped, then moving nervously. He was pale and the lines in his face seemed more deeply etched.

"You're in withdrawal."

He nodded. "I haven't eaten anything since early yesterday evening."

"Nathan hypnotized you?"

"Yes. Three times. He gave me about the same suggestions he gave you."

"But for you, they worked."

"So far. I'm weak, hungry—God, I'm hungry—but I've felt worse. And I probably feel better than you did eighteen or twenty hours in. I'm supposed to be in bed though."

"I can believe that! Why aren't you?"

He smiled thinly. "I wanted to talk to you while I could still make sense. Wanted you to know just how things stood between us and the Garkohn."

"Who else knows?"

He grunted. "Neila's been careful not to ask—which means she knows. Jacob knows. He even sat in on a couple of my sessions with Nathan. The Garkohn are getting bolder, ordering people around, spying more openly. Most people know something is wrong. I've had complaints." He had been gazing off into space. Now he looked at Alanna. "I wanted you to know because you can deal with the Tehkohn. You're the only one here who knows anything about them. I'm hoping you won't have to do anything before my withdrawal is over, but I want you to be able to if necessary."

"Does Jacob know you want that of me?"

"Yes. He doesn't think much of the idea, but while I'm alive, he'll obey."

She did not want to talk or think of his dying, did not want to remember how easily it could happen during the next few days. He seemed to misunderstand her sudden pensiveness. He spoke softly.

"I know it's a heavy responsibility, girl, and you're just out of withdrawal. I'm sorry to have to…"

She got up and went to him, laid a hand on his shoulder. She had just been able to stop herself in time from touching his throat in the Kohn gesture of affection. "It's a responsibility I had already accepted. You know it's not the responsibility I'm concerned about."

For a moment, there was silence. He covered her hand with his

own in what first seemed to her an oddly Kohn response. But no. Some gestures were universal.

"Why don't you go to bed now?" she asked.

He nodded, got up. But as he started away, she thought of something else. "Jules, what happened to the Tehkohn prisoners?"

He turned back. "Nothing. Natahk didn't mention moving them even after Diut escaped."

"Has anyone fed them?"

"We tried. They've refused to eat. No one has forced them."

Alanna nodded. "Do you mind if I take them something?"

He looked at her strangely. "If you want to. If the Garkohn guards will let you." As sick as he was, he was curious. The dangerous kind of curiosity. But he would not ask his questions. She spoke quietly.

"I know some of them, Jules. Some of them helped to make things easier for me when I was their prisoner. After my withdrawal, none of them were any more cruel to me than they were to each other. It wouldn't be right for me to let them starve without trying to help." Half truths. She wondered why she didn't tell him her real reason for wanting to feed the prisoners—that if they were fuzzy-minded from hunger, even in their slightly weakened condition, they might do some unnecessary killing when they escaped. Missionary lives might be lost. But no. It was not yet time for him to know that they definitely would escape. She could not let him know that until Diut was ready. She would have to tell him something more though. His curiosity was clearly not satisfied. And now he was ready to ask questions.

"They treated you…well, Lanna, when they held you captive?"

"As well as could be expected, I guess. As long as I did as I was told." Again, she was not telling the whole truth. But then, very little that she told him about herself and the Tehkohn could be wholly true.

"They didn't…?" He struggled with the words and his struggle gave her warning of what was coming. She stood watching him coldly and feeling no inclination to help. "They didn't rape you?"

"No," she said. "They didn't." He would want to believe her and he would find a way to do so. He would not even have asked such a question if the Garkohn kidnappings had not forced him to consider the Kohn human enough to do such a thing.

"I haven't wanted to ask you these things, Lanna." He met her eyes sadly. "Perhaps because I was afraid of the answers you might give. It seemed so incredible that we found you alive. I just wanted to thank God that we had you back and let it go at that. But this damned Garkohn thing wouldn't let me. It started me wondering…"He broke off abruptly. "It doesn't matter."

Obviously it mattered. How had he been able to give her charge

of the settlement's relations with the Tehkohn while he entertained such doubts? Or had he given her the responsibility in the hope that his apparent trust would touch her conscience and forestall any act of treachery? She finished his sentence for him. "Started you wondering whether or not you really did have me back."

He accepted the accusation. "Do we, Lanna?"

"I was like a servant among the Tehkohn," she lied softly. "Like a slave, really—the way you and Neila were on Earth in Forsyth. I had no blue in my coloring and thus no rank among them. They didn't know quite what to do with me so they accepted me as a kind of interesting freak. They gave me whatever jobs they thought I could do. Other than that, they left me alone. I was an alien, an outsider." She paused for a moment, watching him. "Please don't make me feel as though I'm still an outsider, even here at home."

He sighed, seemed to deflate, and she knew she had won at least temporarily. He came back to her and hugged her. "I'm sorry, girl. It's the withdrawal. I'm not thinking clearly or it would never occur to me to doubt you."

She said nothing, let him go off to bed thinking he had hurt her. Surprisingly, he had.

Natahk's hunters let her in to see the prisoners without trouble. By now, they were probably used to allowing Missionaries to go in and try to convince the Tehkohn to eat.

The captives did not bother to look up at her as she entered. Their prison was a single large room with walls and ceiling of rough wood and a floor of hard-packed earth. It had a few tiny windows near the ceiling—enough to let in a little light and air. None of the captives brightened the room further with their personal luminescence. None of them wasted energy in any way at all. They sat or lay on the floor, silent and unmoving. Alanna spoke to them bluntly in Tehkohn.

"If I bring you food and guarantee it safe, will you eat?"

There was a long silence. Finally a judge near her answered quietly. "We will not eat." No one contradicted him.

Alanna faced him. "Can you believe that I would poison you?"

"We don't know."-His coloring became dimly iridescent with indecision. "We don't know who you are, Alanna."

"So," she said softly. She could have taken offense. The judge had insulted her by questioning her loyalty. Another Tehkohn, even of a lower clan, could probably have made the judge apologize. Alanna might have been able to do it herself, but it would accomplish nothing. The captives would still refuse to eat, would still doubt her. They would simply keep their doubts to themselves.

Now all three groups had questioned her loyalty—Garkohn, Missionary, and Tehkon. No one knew who she was except Diut. What

would she do, she wondered bleakly, if he began to doubt. She spoke again to the Tehkohn.

"Is there nothing that I can do for you…to ease your wait?"

"Nothing that you would be permitted to do."

There was nothing more to be said. She turned to go.

"Alanna!" The voice was quick and just a little louder than necessary. Loud enough to shift everyone's attention to the speaker, a small well-colored huntress. Cheah, her name was. She rose to her feet in one swift motion, and came to stand before Alanna. It was she who with her judge-husband Jeh had found Alanna sprawled in the doorway of the Tehkohn prison room. It was she whom Alanna had lived to kill. And yet they had become friends. Cheah was raucous and Alanna quiet, but somehow they enjoyed each other's company—and admired each other's savagery.

"We have heard what the Garkohn did to you," said the huntress.

Alanna lifted her head slightly, stifling a rush of humiliation. "It is undone. And the Garkohn will pay."

"Didn't I say it!" Cheah looked around at the other prisoners, her body suddenly shimmering triumphant in the room's half light.

"Many things may be said," muttered a hunter off to Cheah's left. Alanna looked at him and saw by his poor coloring that he had made a mistake. Perhaps his hunger had made him careless.

"So?" Cheah looked at him coldly. "Talk is not enough for you? Shall we discuss it another way?"

But the hunter had realized his mistake. His body was already fading to yellow in the slow way that signified submission to a more powerful person. Cheah was not only well-colored, but she had lived up to her coloring by earning an impressive reputation as a fighter, and when necessary, a killer. Her size did not deceive those who knew her.

"Alanna has suffered as we have," said Cheah to the group. "You understand what I mean. And now, she offers help and ignores your insults in order to prove what she should not have to prove." She lowered her voice abruptly and the others leaned forward to hear. But her words were not for them. "I know who you are, Alanna. And if you bring food, I will eat."

Alanna smiled, stepped to Cheah, and touched the back of her hand briefly to one side of the huntress's face in a gesture of friendship. Then Alanna turned and left the building, barely able to conceal her elation.

Cheah had given her a victory. Alanna would bring enough food for all the prisoners, and Cheah would eat, would taste everything. Then she would fast. She knew what to do. When the others saw that she suffered no ill effects, they would eat too.

Cheah's confidence in Alanna had restored Alanna's wavering confidence in herself—in her ability to play two separate roles. As long as she had Cheah's support among the Tehkohn prisoners and Jules's support among the Missionaries, she had a chance.

And when Natahk returned, things would become even more complicated. She would have to play three roles. But she could do it. She *would* do it.

She hurried back to the Verrick cabin to get food for the captives.

CHAPTER SIX

Alanna

I had managed to avoid the Tehkohn Hao for most of my first season with the Tehkohn. It had not been hard since he lived in a different section of the dwelling and since people who wanted to see him usually had to go to him. I had not wanted to see him—although I was probably lucky I did, when I did. I had just hit one hunter with a stone—he had earned the blow—and I was about to face his friend. I would have had to fight, and though I was careful not to show it, I was afraid. Hunters were trained to kill with their hands and they possessed great strength. Also, even if I fought this hunter and won, how many of his friends would I have to fight? How many others would leap to his defense as he was coming to the defense of his fallen friend?

Then Diut stepped in and the confrontation was over. I was grateful to him but my gratitude did not make it any easier for me to look at him or be near him. He was a monster—as much a mutant as the Clayarks back on Earth—though among the Kohn people, his was a desirable mutation. He was huge and physically powerful, and hideous. No Missionary could have called him a caricature of the "true" human shape. He was more an intensification of everything nonhuman in the Kohn. And somehow, that made him seem alien even among them. With all that, though, I considered the fear and revulsion I felt for him to be foolish and dangerous. For one thing, he had done nothing to me, had shown no interest in me since that first night in Jeh and Cheah's apartment. Clearly he meant me no harm. For another thing, the respect he received from the Tehkohn was far beyond anything even Jules could expect from the Missionaries. What would he and his people do to me if they realized how I felt about him? It would be as though the Missionaries had realized that T

thought their God was so much air. Yet it was hard for me to control my feelings against Diut—especially now when he was so close to me.

"Find Gehnahteh or Choh," he told me. "Tell them that your time with them is ended. Then go back to Jeh and Cheah."

I left him quickly. I didn't know why he was making the change, and I was worried. But I was so glad to get away from him that I didn't stop to ask questions. I went straight to the apartment of Gehnahteh and Choh. Only Choh was at home when I went in. He was shaping a heavy stick into a handle for some farmer's digging prongs. He looked up at me in surprise.

"What has frightened you?"

I told him about the hunter I had hit.

"You fought a hunter?" he asked incredulously. "You fought and won?"

I shook my head. "It wasn't a fight. And I may have lost more than I won. Perhaps the Tehkohn Hao has some punishment in mind for me."

Choh put his knife and wood on the floor and came to stand before me. "He's not one to delay punishment, Alanna. If he had been angry with you, you would know." Choh paused. "Alanna, you are a friend."

He was saying good-bye to me. I touched the back of my hand to his face in the friendship gesture. I had seen others use the gesture but this was the first time I had used it myself—the first time I had wanted to use it. He covered my hand for a moment with a furry paw, then spoke once more.

"I will tell you a thing that perhaps I should not tell you because I'm not certain."

"What is it?"

"The Tehkohn Hao has decided that you are a fighter. We told him you were, but he said, 'Wait. Let her prove it.' I think now you have proven it."

"You told him?"

"You had already proven it to us."

We looked at each other for a long moment, then I smiled. He had asked me once, "Do all your people bare their teeth to show pleasure?" I went to get the spare clothing I had accumulated and my few toilet articles.

"You have worked as one of us," said Choh. "We will miss you."

And I would miss them, I thought as I left him and walked out into the dim corridors. But as long as I was not to be punished, I did not mind returning to Jeh and Cheah—except for one thing. Jeh and Cheah did live in the fighter section of the dwelling. They lived near the outside where raiders would come first if they got past the guards,

and they lived near the Tehkohn Hao. I would be seeing more of Diut and I would have to make a greater effort to get used to him.

Cheah welcomed me to her apartment, her small body blazing white.

"Ah-la-naaah!" she cried exuberantly. "I heard you fought Haileh—that you beat him to the ground!"

I stared at her in surprise. "You're glad?"

"Glad! That one was an animal! He tried to humiliate you because he thought you were weak. He tried it with me once because I'm small. I almost broke his neck!"

I laughed because I could picture her doing exactly that. She was not the kind of person who would let her smallness make her a target for other people's frustrations.

"You are back where you belong," she said. "Jeh told Diut that you were a fighting woman." She led me across the room. "Put your things here. We will make a pallet for you. Come!"

I spent five days with them. Easy days compared to what I had been used to. I had the work of the apartment to do—cooking and cleaning—because without any blue at all, I was the lowest-ranking person in the apartment. As I had relieved Choh, now I relieved Cheah. I didn't like it particularly, but it kept me busy. And Cheah chattered and Jeh and I listened, amused. Jeh said once, "I take her with me to trade with the lake people, Mahkahkohn. She talks and talks and they are all white and at ease and she trades them out of their fur." I believed it.

Then came the day when Jeh brought home gifts for me. There was a long robelike garment of fur dyed blue-green. It was made from the skin of a single large animal. The fur was coarser than Kohn fur but it was thick and the garment looked warm and comfortable. And there were new shoes of the same ankle-high boot type that I had been wearing, but these were fur-lined, and colored blue-green to match the robe.

"Put them on," said Jeh. "They are yours."

"You give them to me?"

"Diut gives them to you."

I froze. "Diut?" In spite of my fears, I had hardly seen the Tehkohn Hao since moving back with Jeh and Cheah. And I did not want to see him.

"He made me go with him to get that thing," said Jeh, gesturing toward the robe. "He said you and I were the same size. I had to put the thing on so that he could see whether it was as long as he wanted it to be on you."

I stood listening to him, hearing what he was telling me, and what he was not telling me. I strove not to believe it. "Jeh, why is he

giving me these things?"

"To please you, Alanna. He gives gifts sometimes, though yours are stranger than any I have seen. Get your other things. Gather them all. He's waiting for you."

"I…must go?" I managed to keep my voice almost normal.

"You are afraid?"

"Yes!"

"He said you would be. But you must go. Your fear will pass."

Slowly, I gathered my belongings. But my hands were shaking so that I kept dropping things. Cheah came over, oddly silent, and helped me. Jeh led me out of the apartment and through the corridor for some distance to what appeared to be a solid wall. A hidden door.

Jeh felt for the handhold, found it, and pulled the door open. He spoke quietly.

"Go in, Alanna."

I didn't move. It was all I could do to keep myself from running away down the corridor. I had come this far by telling myself that I could talk to Diut—talk him out of this…experiment, or whatever it was. And I did not want to disgrace myself before Jeh and Cheah. Now though…

"Alanna!"

I jumped, looked at him.

"Go in."

I went through the door and he shut it behind me.

There was no one in the room. It was a large room made of the same gray stone as the rest of the dwelling. There were two long chests of polished wood, one on either side of the room. I dropped my things atop one of these chests. There was a doorway on the opposite side of the room and I could hear someone moving around in the room beyond. So the Tehkohn Hao had at least a two-room apartment. Luxury. I could have lived my life happily without such luxury. There was a large animal-skin rug on the floor before the fireplace. I sat down on it and stared into the low fire trying to think. Everything had happened too quickly, too unexpectedly. It made no sense. Diut had hardly looked at me during my stay with the Tehkohn. And surely I could not have seemed sexually attractive to him.

He came into the room, his feet making almost no sound against the stone floor. I looked at him once, then looked away quickly, closed my eyes in desperation. I would keep still. I would not behave stupidly. We would talk, Diut and I, and end this nonsense.

"Tehkohn Hao," I greeted. My voice was steady.

"Alanna."

"Am I to have a liaison with you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why do men and women usually have liaisons?"

He was standing over me off to one side, towering, huge. I felt powerless and afraid and angry at myself for being afraid. I *had* to keep calm.

"Are forced matings the way among the Tehkohn?" I asked quietly.

"Have I used force?"

"Have I accused you?"

He whitened slightly and sat down beside me. "We have no tradition of forced matings, Alanna."

"Will you let me go then?"

"But I have chosen you."

"I have not chosen you."

"What man have you chosen?"

"I…none. I didn't know I would be permitted to mate here."

"Has any man approached you?"

"No."

"No man would unless I ordered it. None but me."

I said nothing.

"Your differences keep others away," he said. "You come to me as a stranger, an alien in spite of all that you have learned. But when you leave me, you will be Tehkohn. When others see that I have accepted you, they will accept you."

I began to tremble, and to believe, really believe, that there was no way out of this. I was afraid I would lose control of myself if he touched me. When he touched me.

He reached over, took my hand, and examined it much as the Garkohn huntress Gehl once had.

"The fingers are too long," he said. "And too slender. The nails are too thin, too weak. You are right to keep them short. The hairlessness is ugly at first—wrong, a distortion of what should be. But the coloring is the greatest distortion. Brown. No blue at all. The lowest artisan has some blue, but you have none."

I snatched my hand away from him, now more angry than frightened.

"There are* no customs here that apply to you," he said. "You have no rights, no freedoms that I do not allow. Without the blue, you are like an animal among us."

I glared at him. "How could you want a woman who is like an animal?"

And his blue grew suddenly lighter with a great deal of white. "To see for myself that she is truly a woman."

My fear was drowned in anger and humiliation. It was an

experiment then. The creature wanted to see for itself what it was like to make love with an ugly distorted woman. I was here to satisfy its curiosity. “I wish I had the words to tell you how deformed and ugly you are to me, Tehkohn Hao. No animal could be as terrible.” He would hit me. I didn’t care.

He did not hit me. He stood up and hauled me to my feet. “We have traded insults. Now we will go and prove to each other how little our differences matter.”

He led me into the other room where there was another fireplace —more luxury—more wooden chests and a wide wooden platform strewn with furs. It took me a moment to realize that the platform was actually the first bed that I had seen in the Tehkohn dwelling. I stood staring at it mindlessly until Diut opened my robe. Then I looked at him.

In that instant, he must have sensed just how much I suddenly hated him. He drew back warily.

“Be careful, Alanna.”

There had been a wild human on Earth—a man fast enough to run me down to get what he wanted. He got it. Then I smashed his head with a rock. As I faced Diut now, I hardly saw his ugliness. It was as though he was wearing the face of that wild human. It was as though he had brought me the pain that man brought me. He put his hands on me again and I lunged for his eyes.

He jerked his head back and in the moment that he was off balance, I came to my senses. I turned and ran for the corridor door. But he was fast—blindingly fast. I was fast myself and he caught me before I’d gone five steps.

He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me backward against him. I kicked back hard into his knee.

He flared yellow with pain and relaxed his hold on me for an instant. I broke free and ran again.

He was not so quick this time as he came limping after me, but I could not find the outside door. I could have found it if I had not been so frantic. I didn’t have much trouble with hidden doors any more because, normally, I memorized their location in relation to other objects. This one I had been too frightened to memorize.

Diut came up behind me, caught me by the neck, and threw me to the floor. “Will you make me kill you, Alanna?”

I had no doubt at all that he would do it. I lay there looking up at him.

“Get up.”

I rose slowly, faced him. He knocked me down again with a single openhanded blow. My head rang with the strength of it. And again:

“Get up.”

I stayed where I was, waiting for my head to clear. I wondered why he didn't just grab me and rape me the way the wild human had. It would be simple enough. It would even be simple for me. I would not dare to kill him. I knew that now. Not unless I was also ready to kill myself—before his people caught me. My moment of unthinking rage had passed. Now why didn't he just take what he wanted and get it over with.

He kicked me. "You will get up."

Bruised and furious, I stood up, half expecting to be knocked down again. Instead, as though nothing had interrupted his earlier attempt, he opened my robe again, slipped it off me, and stripped off my other clothing.

He walked around me, inspecting me much as Gehnahteh and Choh had on my first day with them. I stood glaring at him. At least I could glare at him now, without turning away. He was becoming for me nothing more than an extremely ugly man. His size and strength were more impressive now than his appearance.

"Well, get on with it," I said. "You are an animal and you want to mate. Mate then."

His coloring whitened. "People kept coming to me telling me that you were a fighter."

"I am a thing. A thing that you have become curious about. Satisfy your curiosity."

He took me by the shoulder and led me back into the bedroom to the bed. I lay down among the furs waiting for him, not looking at him.

Nothing happened.

After a while, I looked at him, saw that he had sat down on the edge of the bed and was watching me. He spoke quietly.

"It is a custom among the Garkohn to capture Tehkohn fighters and force them to eat meklah."

I frowned, wondering what that had to do with anything.

"Sometimes my fighters starve themselves, refusing to trust any food offered them. Sometimes the Garkohn let them starve themselves to death. Other times though, it's more amusing to the Garkohn to wait until my fighters are weak, and then force meklah down their throats."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because your behavior with me is much like the behavior of my captured fighters. When they are forced to give in, they continue to speak arrogantly, challengingly. When they can no longer fight with their bodies, they continue to fight with words."

"What else can they do?"

"Nonfighters submit at once. Abjectly."

I sat up looking at him. “Garkohn humiliate Tehkohn because the two are enemies. Why do you humiliate me?”

“There need be no humiliation in this for you, Alanna. I am the leader of my people.” He paused for a moment, then flashed white blindingly. “And you have distinguished yourself. You are the only woman ever to try to refuse me.”

And he flashed white on that. It amused him.

“What do you want of me?” I asked. “Only the night?”

“Many nights. And many days. I’ll continue your teaching—help you live as a fighter among us. As I have said, you will be Tehkohn when you leave me. Tehkohn, and your own person, not dependent on others to guide or guard you.”

I frowned, re-evaluating him in spite of myself. “I will be free? It will be as though I had some blue in my coloring?”

“Yes.”

Watching him, I suddenly realized that if he closed his eyes, they would probably vanish entirely. As it was, he seemed to look through slanted holes in thick fur. “You should have told me that before,” I said. “That I would be free, I mean.”

He hesitated. “It was what I had planned for you but I was not certain that it was what you wanted, that it would calm you.”

I said nothing. I was calmer now because I was able to control my reaction to his appearance, but there was no need to tell him that.

“And anyway,” he said, whitening, “I have never bargained for a mate before. I had to find my way.” He pulled me back on the bed, clearly ready now to see how good a bargain he had made.

He covered me with the thick, very soft blanket of his fur and hurt me as he forced his way into my body, an intruder too large and much unwelcome. Alien as we were to each other, he must have been able to read my pain in my expression.

“I always give pain before I give pleasure,” he said. “Your body will accustom itself to me.”

And if it didn’t, that was my problem. I put my teeth together and closed my eyes and waited for it to be over. He startled me once, bit me just at the throat. Not hard, not painfully, but he let me feel his teeth more than I would have preferred. I was surprised enough to grab a handful of his head fur to pull his head away. But in doing that, I looked at him and saw that his body had gone luminescent white. He continued to bite me, but more gently.

I let go of his fur, smoothed it unnecessarily. Left alone, it would smooth itself but I found it pleasant to touch. His one good feature.

“You like my fur,” he said later as we lay together, side by side.

“To touch,” I said. “It’s good to touch.”

He took one of my hands and put it into his mane. I felt the fur,

the flesh beneath. There was a neck there, completely hidden. And broad as the shoulders were, they were not as broad as they looked.

"I find your smoothness pleasing too," he said. "Good to touch." He began to whiten a little and I realized that my hand exploring his mane was giving him pleasure. He closed his eyes—and they did vanish. There was no sign in what seemed now an even surface of fur that he had ever had eyes. Not even a slight indentation. I shuddered and put my head against his shoulder so that I would not have to look at him. I could get used to his strangeness. I was already getting used to it. But there were some things about him that would probably always be alien to me.

On the second night of Jules's withdrawal, Diut returned to the Mission colony.

Alanna had spent most of the day sitting with Jules. He was in pain now, perspiring, vomiting, tossing. But at that, Neila said he was having an easier time than Alanna had had. Still, Nathan wanted someone with him at all times. Alanna had not minded the duty. Neila had her regular housework to do. Alanna had broken her watch only to take food to the Tehkohn prisoners. Finally, though, Neila had relieved her and sent her off to bed.

She went to her room sleepily, carrying a lamp and feeling strangely alone now that she was cut off from the sounds of Jules's suffering. As much as she hated to see him in pain, she realized that it was easier to be with him and be able to see for herself that he was still alive.

She put her lamp on the chest near her bed and turned to close the door. Not until it was closed did she realize that she was not alone in the room. She froze, ceasing even to breathe, every sense alert to pinpoint the direction from which the first warning sound had come.

Somewhere in the shadows, Diut said her name.

She identified the voice and the direction from which it came in the same instant and turned just in time to see him materialize from a wall.

She crossed the room to him quickly in silent relief and joy. He caught her by the shoulders and looked at her for a moment, holding her away from him. Then she struggled free of his hands and buried herself in his fur.

Mentally, she gave him all her trouble—her heavy responsibility to the colony, the doubted loyalties, the Garkohn danger. Let him hold them for a while. He was accustomed to such things. It was only a game played within her own mind, but she felt as though she had shed a great weight, as though she could relax completely for the first time since her return to the settlement.

She spoke finally, softly. "You've been home?"

"Yes."

She drew back from him now, waiting. They sat down together on the bed.

"The defeat was bad," he said, "but not as bad as it first seemed. The escape passages were created to be overlooked by invaders. Most of them were."

She nodded, remembering that she had fled into one of these passages herself when Garkohn invaded the dwelling. She had run to the inner apartments where the young children were left in the care of artisan families. But somehow, despite the deliberately confusing maze of corridors, the Garkohn had gotten there ahead of her and it was too late.

As though responding to her thoughts, Diut said, "The people waited until I returned to hold the ceremony for Tien."

She looked at him but he would not meet her eyes.

"Our trade families had already painted her," he continued softly. "Blue. A good blue. All who were left alive came to see her. Even the injured."

She lowered her head, eyes closed. She had not meant to cry again. She had shed no tears since her first night with Jules on the trail back to the settlement. Jules had thought then that she cried with relief at her rescue.

But now she found herself weeping soundlessly against Diut. She was glad that she had not been able to attend the Tehkohn funeral rites. The Kohn had no concept of life after death and such rites were held solely for the benefit of the living. The dead were judged by those likely to know the best and worst sides of their character, the families with whom they traded—families from clans other than their own. If a hunter was lazy or dishonest, no one knew it better than the farmer with whom he traded. Thus the trade families judged and gave honor or dishonor through the color of the dye they used to cover the mottled yellow of death. The reputation of the surviving blood family could be helped or injured by one of these judgments. But of course, Diut's infant child would be painted blue to honor Diut. It would not be the unique Hao blue, but the trade families would approximate it as closely as they could. And Diut said they had done well. The funeral would have been a time to show pride in the honor done. Expression of grief was a private thing—one of the few private things in Kohn life.

Diut held her until her spasm of weeping passed. He spoke no words of comfort, but in the Kohn way, he allowed his coloring to fade to the rare gray of grief and mourning. The color, like the emotion it symbolized, was a private thing. It was an admission not only of inner pain, but of helplessness and human vulnerability. A Hao

was the personification of Kohn power, a being who must show only strength before his people. But now, alone with one who shared his pain, he was free to admit his own vulnerability, free to let Alanna know that she did not grieve alone. To her, his coloring said as much as words could have from a Missionary man, and she had long ago realized that she preferred the silent Kohn ways to the Missionary groping for words.

After a while, she regained control and ceased crying. She knew that Diut had other things to tell her, and that for the sake of the settlement, she had to compose herself and listen.

"You have made plans while you were away," she said. "Tell me my part in them."

His coloring slowly returned to normal. He gave her a long quiet look. "I have heard that your father is in withdrawal."

"So. I was with him all day. My mother is with him now."

"Only your father? No others?"

She shrugged. "Me. I have withdrawn."

"I know of that." He touched her throat briefly. "It is harder to break away without the ceremony. I knew what I asked of you. But I believed that you were strong enough to do it."

She accepted this as the combined apology and compliment that it was and acknowledged it with a nod.

"How is your father?"

"Well. We may have found a Missionary counterpart for the returning ceremony." She told him briefly of the experiment with hypnosis. He seemed to understand.

"Verrick tests this way then. But if it works as he hopes, will he order other Missionaries to use it now or will he wait until he has moved them north?"

Alanna thought for a moment, realized that though she had not considered the question before, she knew what the answer had to be. "I think he will wait, because of Natahk. I think he will not want the people exposed to Natahk's anger—as he will be exposed himself s" She told him of Natahk's recent arrogance and its cause. By the time she finished, he had yellowed slightly.

"Verrick must choose his own way," he said. "But if he waits as you say, the Missionaries will be able to carry little more than the supply of meklah that they will need when they leave. Meklah enough for the trip over the mountains and enough to last until they find a place to settle again. They will have to abandon many more of their possessions to the Garkohn than should be necessary."

Alanna knew he was right, but then, so was Jules in his way. She said nothing.

Diut changed the subject abruptly. "Have you been able to see the

captives yet?"

She told him of her visits to the prisoners, of how they had at first refused to eat. That brought more yellow to his coloring.

"And do they all eat now? Has Cheah satisfied them?"

"Most ate today. Tomorrow, I think they will all eat."

"Then you know how careful you must be. Once their Garkohn guards see that they are all eating, they might decide to tamper with the food whether Natahk has ordered it or not. And he probably has. Deception is easier and safer than force."

"When will you free them?" she asked.

He thought about it. "I would have done it tonight, had you not managed to get food to them. But now… They will be better able to co-operate with their rescuers when they have all eaten. Also, it would be better if I gave Verrick time to finish his withdrawal. He will need his strength to face the Garkohn when Natahk learns of the escape." He paused for a moment. "I will wait three days more."

She felt cold suddenly as she realized that by feeding the prisoners, she had probably saved Jules's life. If Natahk lost his prisoners and found the leader of his captive Missionaries in the process of breaking free of the meklah, he might be angry enough to kill. But in three more days, Jules would surely be through his withdrawal. Perhaps he would even be strong enough to pretend that the withdrawal had not taken place. At least, he would be strong enough to face Natahk. Alanna had made it possible for Diut to give him that much. Now if only Diut could give him the other thing that he and the Missionaries needed so desperately: A new start.

"How will it be for them in the north?" she asked. "Very bad?"

"Drier," he said. "Colder. They will live if they want life badly enough."

"But there are no people there?"

"None."

"They will live then." She meant it. The Missionaries were resourceful and their Mission drove them. They could win a struggle against the elements as they and their ancestors had won many such struggles on Earth. Here, as on Earth, it was the struggle against more numerous other peoples that had stopped them.

Diut looked at her. "If Verrick wishes it, I will send a few Tehkohn with him to teach him the best ways of living there."

She did not have to think to realize that such help could save many lives. She lifted her hand in quick gratitude to lose it in the fur of his throat. He covered it for a moment with his own.

"I did not know how you would greet me when I came here tonight," he said softly.

She looked at him, startled.

"I wondered whether you would relearn your old way of seeing me, as a distortion of what should be. I looked at you with your Missionaries and tried to see you as one of them."

"So? And what did you see?"

"That you feared for them. That you were much interested in saving them."

Alanna met his eyes. "I am, yes. How could I not be?"

"You are one who bargains, Alanna. Are you bargaining with me now for the safety of your people?"

"Yes."

He stared at her for a long moment without speaking. Then he lay back on the bed. There was white suddenly in his coloring. Amusement. But she knew him now and she was not surprised. "You will never say what I expect you to say. You don't change."

"I've changed," she said.

"What do you want of me? Only help for your Missionaries?"

"What should I want of you? We've made a child together, you and I. What should I want of my husband?"

He sat up and pulled her close. "Tahneh spoke to me before I left the mountains." This was the other Hao, the old woman. "She comes with her advice, you know. She said, 'Let her go with her people if she wants to go. Show her yellow if she wants it and leave her. Let her go or stay of her own free will.'"

"She knew I wouldn't go," said Alanna. "She wanted you to know."

He said nothing.

"In a way, it will be harder for me now," she continued. "The Missionaries will be so far away… But I couldn't leave with them. I'm less one of them now than ever. And there is no man for me among them."

"I have already seen that."

She glanced at him sharply.

"All right," he said, reading her expression. "I'll leave you to insult them yourself."

"I wasn't insulting them. I only meant…"

He put a hand over her mouth, his coloring fading to white. "They are blue people, Alanna. All blue. Wholly admirable."

Alanna sighed and shook her head. He could be as condescending, as patronizing, toward the Missionaries as most Missionaries were toward the Kohn. But now was not the time to argue with him about it.

He smoothed her hair. "And worthy people that they are, they no longer need you." His tone changed, became more serious. "It would cause no real hardship among them if you left them now—went with

the prisoners when they escape."

She spoke quickly, concealing her alarm. "No, Diut. It would cause worse than hardship. Natahk would tell Jules where I had gone and why. And whether Jules fully believed him or not, he would be in no mood to trust you when you visited him again."

"Natahk will speak eventually regardless of what you do. If he tells what he knows while you're here, the Missionaries will kill you."

"I know the risk," she said. "And I'm not eager to take it. But I don't want the Missionaries to die because my going made them too suspicious to trust you."

"It is not likely that they will. Verrick will not like having to trust me if Natahk plants suspicion in his mind, but he will have no choice. He can escape this valley only by co-operating with me. He will understand that—as you understand it." He looked at her silently for a moment. "You know your work here is done. Why do you resist leaving?"

"I cannot go until I know they are safe."

"You mean you will not go." There was a slight harshness to his voice.

"They can still make mistakes, Diut, with the Garkohn and even with you. Mistakes that can destroy them. Mistakes that I can help them avoid."

"They are not children, Alanna. You have set them on the right path. If they cannot follow that path now, without you, then perhaps they do not deserve to survive."

"I cannot desert them. For a while, they were my people."

"Perhaps they are still your people. Perhaps you were too quick to reject Tahneh's words. Are you so certain that you would not prefer to leave with them when they go north?"

She felt a rush of bitter anger. "I've already answered that. Why do you ask again? Do you want me to go?"

There was a long silence. He showed no yellow in his coloring, but she knew she had angered him. She hoped she had also made him feel ashamed. At first, she thought she had. His voice was mild when he spoke again.

"I have humiliated Natahk by walking away from his hunters as though they were blind and deaf. I will humiliate him again by taking the rest of his prisoners from him. Do you know what he would do to you to avenge himself if he learned that you were my wife?"

She stared at the floor, knowing and not wanting to know. "He will not find out."

"You will go with the prisoners tomorrow. You will leave your helpless Missionaries to me, and you will take yourself out of danger. Otherwise, I will abandon your Missionaries and let them fend for

themselves."

She listened, dismayed. He had her. He had found the right weapon. However much she believed she could help the Missionaries, they did not need her nearly as much as they needed him.

"I will obey," she said softly. "But if the Missionaries are killed as a result of some foolishness that I could have helped them avoid, what will we do, Diut, you and I. We will not have a marriage. What will you have saved me for?"

"You have said enough."

"Not if I have failed to convince you! You were the prisoner of foreigners once—desert people. Didn't you decide then that it would be better to die than to serve them at the expense of your own people?" This was something that had happened when Diut was little more than a boy. It had been his first success after coming of age as the Tehkohn ruler. He had arranged a tie with the tough desert tribe and brought them and Tahneh, their Hao, to the mountains as allies against the Garkohn.

"You are not a prisoner," he said.

"Since we came together I have not been. But now…" Her voice trailed away and he said nothing for several seconds. He was not accustomed to people arguing with him when his decisions were already made. There was a time, Alanna remembered, when he would simply have slapped her and demanded that she obey. But he was changing.

"You are not a prisoner," he repeated softly.

"So?"

He sighed. "The Missionaries are still your people. You know it. They are like you, and that is important." He put his arm around her, toyed with her hair. "You want to be with them as long as they are here because you know that when they leave, you may not see them again."

She nodded, agreeing, glad he had understood. For a moment, she was overwhelmed by the thought that she would not have put into words herself. No more Earth-human faces. Ever. "If I can see them leave the valley," she whispered, "and know that they are free, then I will be free. I'll go home with you and be what both you and I want me to be."

"If you live." He grayed bleakly. "Stay. Do what you must do."

"And you will help?"

"So."

Gratefully, wearily, she leaned against him. After a while, she lifted her head, flattened his fur out of the way, and bit him just at the throat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Diut

We had to learn to understand each other, Alanna and I—understand why there were times when neither of us seemed to react properly to the other. I knew, for instance, that she was more impressed with my size and strength than with my blue. On her savage homeworld where people preyed on each other freely and where coloring had little significance, sire and strength were important. She told me that a male of her kind who was my size would eat well and would be given a wide berth by smaller people.

"And a female?" I asked.

She curved her mouth in a way somehow different from the way she did it when she was amused. "Women fought more," she said. "Even those who were large and strong. If we lived, it was often because we were more savage than most men. Sometimes we were caught without warning though, and a man or many men would force us to mate with them. That was perhaps the least that could happen to us. Most often we survived it if we were not too badly beaten—and if there were not too many men. And if the men were not diseased."

"It happened to you?" I asked.

"Yes," she said bitterly. "It happened."

"And thus your anger with me when I demanded a liaison."

She said nothing. I had brought a little of her anger back, I think.

That was the way of her former home. She had learned all her respect for the blue since coming to us. I understood this with my mind, but somehow, I never completely accepted it. Respect for the blue was inborn with us. No one questioned it. It seemed impossible not to value it. I had grown up knowing myself to be highly valued for my blue. Even enemies like the Garkohn would have valued me. Natahk and a few of his higher hunters pretended to be unimpressed

by the blue but I would have gambled that they could not maintain their pretense before me or any other Hao. They knew better than I did how much they needed a Hao to unite them and make them a strong people again—a people worthy of respect.

But since Alanna's people had no such needs, Alanna could forget her learned respect for the blue whenever she wanted to. For instance, when she behaved foolishly and I beat her, she fought back. No Tehkohn would have done that—fought against me. And Alanna never seemed to learn that her fighting did no good. I always hurt her more than she hurt me. I told her that her punishment would be less if she stopped struggling against me, but she ignored me.

She was stubborn beyond belief. For a time, her body was constantly marked with bruises that showed on her naked skin as they never would have on a Tehkohn. The day came when I thought I would have to either send her away from me or kill her. And there were moments when I was certain that it would be better to kill her.

Our most serious confrontation came as we hunted jehruk, the largest flesh eaters of the mountains. I had already taught her much about the jehruk—how they invaded our territory, how they stalked and killed leaf eaters that should have been ours, how they hid in the vines, almost indistinguishable from the leaves around them, and leaped out on unwary people. They camouflaged themselves well, those great ones. Their natural coloring was like the deep judge blue-green. Judges refused to eat their flesh claiming that they and the jehruk shared a common ancestor. They saw the jehruk as their wild relative and they took pride in its ferocity. I saw the jehruk as a creature to test myself against. It grew to be at least my size and it fought me with every intention of smashing my head from my shoulders.

On an earlier hunt, I had fought a fairly small one weaponless and killed it while Alanna watched. And when the fighting was done, she stood back looking at me strangely.

Later when we were camped, she washed my few small wounds and rubbed healing ointment on them. As she worked, she shook her head from side to side and spoke in her own language.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

She answered without hesitation. "That I lost you for a while as you fought that creature. I watched closely, but most of the time I couldn't tell which was the animal."

I blazed white in spite of myself. Only Alanna would say such a thing seriously. She behaved like another Hao, this furless one. She thought she was blue. And though that made me angry sometimes, it also pleased me.

I pulled her down and got her wet with the ointment she had

been rubbing on me. We rolled together on the ground like animals until she made her “laughter” sounds, and on until she made other softer sounds of pleasure. Her body had grown accustomed to me as I had told her it would. We pleased each other very much now. Sometimes during our nights together, we forgave each other for the days. Sometimes, but not always.

The jehruk hunt that forced me to decide what to do with her was a piece of foolishness that we took a long while to forgive each other for. Alanna would have been killed if I had not been with her. And perhaps I would have been killed if she had not done what she did. Perhaps. But at the time, I was in no mood to show gratitude.

We were alone, tracking a huge jehruk—a creature that, by the size of its tracks, had to be half again as large as I was. Alanna had her knife and the weapons that she had had Choh make for her. These were a collection of sticks called a bow and arrows. My fighters had shown much white over them until Alanna began to bring in impressive kills almost as soon as I began teaching her to hunt.

Now she carried her most powerful bow—the best that Choh had been able to make. More than once, I had rubbed the soreness from her arm after she practiced with it. Her arrows were straight and metal-tipped—also Choh’s best. Alanna had brought down large leaf eaters with them. Now she wanted a jehruk—and I wanted to see her go after one. The hunt was hers. I only followed and watched. She understood that it was a test.

We had sought the jehruk for three days without luck. In fact, we had circled around and were nearing home when we came upon the tracks of Alanna’s jehruk. And then Alanna, who had been so watchful for the three days, let the creature see her before she saw it.

It was on all fours and partly concealed by the tree? and vines growing near the small stream to which it had come for water. I saw it just before it saw Alanna. She was several paces closer to it than I was but she did not see it at all. Even as I called a warning to her, the jehruk charged.

She was quick with her bow. It was an old weapon to her. She put one arrow into the jehruk’s chest just before the creature would have reached her. That slowed it, but did not stop it. I stopped it.

I reached her the instant before the jehruk would have, and knocked her out of the way. Then I met the jehruk. It reared onto its hind legs to greet me with long claws and teeth ready—and it did look like a somewhat deformed Kohn. Its face was long and almost as flat as ours. But its jaws were larger and more powerful. Its teeth were long and sharp. Also, its body was too long and its limbs too short to be Kohnlike. And it had no hands. Only the long claws of its feet.

The jehruk raked the air above my head as I hit its midsection

hard, knocking it to the ground. Then, on the ground as we struggled, it raked my back. It brought up its hind feet to disembowel me but I twisted aside. All the while it screamed aloud and burned yellow from the pain of its wound. Once I had it by the throat, but it was too strong, too large, too much maddened by pain. On my own, I would never have chosen to fight it weaponless. Weapons were meant for animals as large as this. We rolled among the vines, biting and tearing at each other, hurting each other, but not enough. All I did, all I had time to do, was defend. I could not overpower the creature. I could not even free my hands for a moment to tear out its eyes. A moment's laxity on my part and it would tear out my throat. It was trying.

Then its yellow luminescence flared even brighter. It gave a scream of agony, twisted its body, screamed again, and sprawled limp across me. Over it stood Alanna, pulling her bloody knife out of its back. This time she had been able to distinguish the animal.

She wiped her knife on the fur of the jehruk, then stepped away from it and from me. She looked to see that I was able to get up, but her glance was quick and guarded. She did not seem to need the words I had to say to her. But I was angry enough and in enough pain to say them anyway.

"You are as blind as a corpse," I raged as I came to stand over her. "You endanger yourself, you endanger me. How much time have I wasted trying to teach you to see?"

She made no excuse, only stood with her head bowed. There was no excuse. She had already shown me how well she could see.

My back in particular hurt me now and I reached around to feel what damage the jehruk had done. My hand came away bloody and half covered with bits of fur torn loose. I turned and walked away from Alanna, went to the stream. I waded in and let the cold water soothe my wounds and carry away the loose fur.

When I came out of the water, I found Alanna cutting vines of the necessary lengths and thicknesses to help us drag home what we could of our kill. I had taught her how to do this. She seemed subdued. She worked silently, and did not look at me. Clearly, she was ashamed. I felt no sympathy for her. My camouflage ability would be marred for some time until my wounds healed and my fur grew again. It was always dangerous to be without full camouflage ability.

"I have ointment," she said finally. "It might help your back."

And I thought: *Save it for your own back*.

"Diut?" She laid a hand on my arm exactly where the jehruk's claws had raked. My fur hid most of that wound and no doubt she did not see it. But I felt it. That was enough.

I turned, striking her across the face as I moved. She stumbled back, almost falling, then moved quickly to escape. I caught her arm

and held her while I beat her. At first she struggled to break away. Then suddenly, she stepped in close to me and before I knew what she meant to do, she dug her fingers into a wound on my shoulder.

My body flared in yellow agony. I would surely have killed her then had she not managed to break away.

She ran to get her bow from where she had left it leaning against a tree. But even hurt, I was too fast to let her fit an arrow into it.

She leaped back from me as I snatched away her bow. Then suddenly she was crouching, her knife in her hand. I stared at her.

"Do you think I will let you kill me with that?"

"Do you think you can stop me? I'm quick, and you're hurt."

"And I have your bow and your arrows."

She looked at me for a long time, her face already bruised and swollen, her eyes narrowed, the knife steady in her hand. "Then use them to kill me," she said. "I will not be beaten again."

Angrily, I threw the bow aside. A weapon. Did she truly believe I needed a weapon to finish her? Even with her knife and my wounds, she must have known she was no match for me. She might hurt me, but I could certainly kill her. And I would have to kill her if I went after her now. Kill her or give in to her.

But slowly, as my initial rage subsided, I realized that I no longer wanted to kill her. I valued her. Valued even her unheard of disregard for the blue because it made our relationship different from any that I could have with a Tehkohn woman. A relationship of the kind Jeh and Cheah had where differences existed, but were ignored. Once I had had such a relationship with Tahneh when she was younger. Our differences had been hi age and experience. She could have been my mother, and yet there had been no barriers. We had loved well. But now Tahneh was old and I was alone again. My people stood in awe of me and obeyed me and looked to me when there was trouble. That was as it should have been, but still, it left me as much alone as Alanna's strangeness left her. We could give comfort to each other, she and I.

Yet there she stood with her stubbornness and her long knife.

"Put the knife down, Alanna. Shall we kill each other like animals? This is foolishness."

"I will not be beaten again," she repeated.

I said nothing.

"Why do you beat me?" she demanded. "What good does it do? Do you think I'll learn faster out of fear of your beatings? I won't. I can't. Send me away from you if I displease you so."

"Alanna, the knife."

"No! Not until you decide. We're not children squabbling in the inner corridors. You need not prove your strength or your coloring to

me. We can talk to each other. Or we can go away from each other!"

I drew a deep breath and let my body relax. "Put away the knife, Alanna." I spoke quietly, gave her no promise. Not in words. That would have been too much. But she rose from her crouch and after a slight hesitation, sheathed her knife.

I went to the pack she always carried when she hunted, and searched through it until I found the ointment in its small metal container. I gestured to her and she came to kneel beside me. We spread ointment on each other's wounds and said little to each other. For days we would say little to each other—until the thing we had done to our liaison began to heal.

I did not beat her again. Not once. And most of the time, she obeyed. When she did not, we talked—sometimes very loudly. But in spite of our disagreements, our nights together became good again. I lay with her contentedly and her knife remained in its sheath.

To Alanna's relief, Jules Verrick came out of his withdrawal two days after Diut's visit. His physical condition was good—better than Alanna's had been. He had not hurt himself as she had, had not gone through the violent convulsions that had wracked her. He was weak, hungry, thirsty, and tired, but that was all. Only five hours after his pain had ended, he was up and sitting in the cabin's main room reading a book that Nathan had brought him—a book with a section on drug addiction. He looked up and smiled when Alanna came in. Her words erased his smile at once.

"We're about to lose our prisoners, Jules." She had already given the room a quick check to be certain that it, like the rest of the house, was free of Garkohn listeners. Now she sat down.

Jules closed his book. "You mean they're plotting an escape? How did you find…?"

"No. I mean their people are coming for them."

"Same question, Lanna. How did you find out?"

"Diut told me. He came back secretly two days ago. He wanted us to know about the escape so that we wouldn't interfere."

Jules grunted. "I must have made a pretty poor impression on him if he thinks I'll stand for that!"

Alanna said nothing. His words were meaningless. More "ritual lying." She had no more time for it than Diut had had. She had some harsh truths for Jules—about the Tehkohn, about herself.

He studied her, interpreted her silence his way. "You told him we'd go along with it, didn't you!" he accused.

"I did," she said quietly. "We had a choice. We could give up the prisoners peacefully, as he commands, or we could fight to keep them and lose the help he would have given us. But he won't help us while

we hold his people captive."

"Not captive, Alanna, *hostage*! Image of God, the whole point of holding them here was to…"

"Was to keep the Tehkohn from attacking. But your talk with Diut has already accomplished that. He won't attack us, and he'll help us break free. But those prisoners are the price we pay for his help."

"Unless he decides not to bother helping us once he has them."

"He's given us his word."

"For what it's worth."

She shrugged, wondering why he continued to argue. There was nothing for him to win. "Diut's word is no small thing with him," she said. "He's testing us. If we can obey him, control the people in this matter, then he'll be willing to trust us in other more important matters."

"We're the ones who must prove ourselves."

"We're in the inferior position. We need him. He doesn't need us."

"That's exactly what's bothering me."

Alanna let her expression go flat and bland. "Could we stop him from taking the prisoners if he came here with a force of Tehkohn?"

"Just possibly, now that we've been warned." He sighed, leaned back wearily. "But of course, we won't. Thanks to our 'inferior position,' we don't dare. I know it." He sat still for a moment, eyes closed. "All right, Alanna. Tell me about the Tehkohn escape. Just what is it we won't be interfering with?"

She watched him very carefully as he spoke, hoping that he was as convinced as he seemed to be. A foolish move now could destroy everything.

"Tomorrow night," she began, "Tehkohn hunters will replace the incoming Garkohn relief guards. They will have to do it near here to prevent Natahk from getting word of it too soon. There's a slight chance that our gate guards might see something—a few luminescent flashes perhaps. If they do, they're to ignore it, and they're to let the Tehkohn hi as though they believe they're admitting Garkohn. Diut has promised that the Tehkohn who take part in this will be disguised —camouflaged—well enough for us defective Missionaries to make an honest mistake. In fact, they'll be disguised well enough for the Garkohn to make the same mistake until the Tehkohn are too close for it to matter.

"They're going to keep the fighting as brief and as quiet as possible, and as long as the Missionary guards stay out of the way, they won't be hurt. That's the most important part. Personally, I think the best thing for our people to do is look scared and confused and run for cover. It's going to be pretty hard for them to tell Tehkohn from Garkohn in the dark, and that can be our excuse. We'll need all

the excuses we can invent, too, because there are bound to be Garkohn around that we don't know about and they're going to take everything they see back to Natahk." She paused, thinking. "That's all. All we have to do is avoid mixing in."

Jules shook his head. "And all we have to do after that is hope Natahk lets us survive long enough for Diut to keep his word. Natahk is going to *know* we aren't completely innocent this time."

"Yes."

"I don't suppose Diut had any suggestions as to how to handle that?"

"No."

"He wouldn't."

She turned her head a little, stared past him. "You know what to do."

"Oh yes." He drew a deep breath. "I know. It's become a habit. Fight, for the sake of appearance, then give in. Over and over and over, to Diut, to Natahk…"

"For the people," said Alanna. "For the Mission."

He said nothing. His face was set in lines of bitterness.

"You give in," said Alanna softly. She was talking more to herself than to Jules. "You give in until your position seems strong. Then you use your strength and others give in." She paused, glanced at Jules. "The people need time to grow numerous and strong."

Jules made a wordless sound of disgust. "Do you think you have to tell me that? I know it, and it still galls me. And the people aren't going to like it any better than I do when they understand it. I only hope I can get it across to them in a way they'll accept before the Garkohn goad them into doing something desperate."

Alanna nodded. "You'll have to teach them. I remember…it was a thing people learned quickly enough in the wilds back on Earth—when to fight and when to give way. The ones who survived learned."

"And this is the wilds all over again, isn't it? With you better fitted than any of us to survive."

She shook her head. "You'll buy my survival, Jules—mine and everyone else's—by submitting, by playing all three of your roles. Leader, slave, ally… I don't blame you for hating it, but I don't doubt for a moment that you'll do it."

"You can add a fourth role to that if anything goes wrong," he said. "Traitor. Because if I fail, the people will surely be destroyed one way or another."

Alanna drew her arms tight across her stomach. "I know." How well she knew. "But deception is the only real weapon we have. We face physical chameleons. To survive, we must be mental chameleons."

There was a long silence, and when Alanna looked at Jules she saw that he had read more than one meaning into her words. She had hoped he would. She had never spoken this openly with him before, but it was time for him to begin to understand.

"Wild human philosophy, Lanna?"

"Survival philosophy."

"Yes. In a way, you used it on us, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"And on the Tehkohn?"

"Yes."

"All without losing yourself? What if I asked you again what happened while you were with the Tehkohn."

"This time, I wouldn't tell you."

"You may have told me too much already."

She shook her head. "Natahk will be here soon. He could force me. into a role that seems traitorous to everyone else. I don't want it to seem so to you."

"The penalty for playing too many roles."

"When I came back to the settlement, I decided that I would play as many as necessary to get the people out of this valley, away from the meklah, the Garkohn, and the Tehkohn." She spoke quietly, but with all the intensity that she actually felt.

He raised an eyebrow. "You seem to mean that. What if I asked you why you mean it—other than to save yourself, of course. Why… chameleon?"

"Because of you and Neila," she said. "I keep telling you that. It's true. It's taken me two years without the sight of a Missionary face to make me realize how great a debt I owe." She stopped, gave him a long look. "Natahk can't stop me now. Even if he killed me, a way of escape would still be opened for you. Only you and the rest of the Missionaries can stop me—by letting him turn you away from me."

"Why don't you tell me why you think he can."

"Maybe he can't. But the fact that he found out about my withdrawal and didn't readdict me means he has something planned for me."

He drew his mouth into a straight line, remembering. "Yes, I see your point. One of them at least. You want me to settle for that one?"

"Yes."

"You can't give the trust you're asking for?"

"Not yet."

"The people are my first concern, Alanna."

She said nothing, watched him.

"Natahk has shown himself to be our enemy. I'd trust your word over his unless, somehow, you too showed yourself to be against us."

His tone changed slightly. “And I still can’t quite believe you’d do that.”

“I wouldn’t,” she said. “For what it’s worth, I couldn’t.” She felt as though she had fought a battle and lost. She had come within a hair of telling him the whole truth. But she had not been able to make herself take the chance. Now, all she had accomplished was to make him suspicious again—and Natahk could still destroy her with a few words. She shook her head, tried to put the mistake behind her. She couldn’t correct it; it was done. “Is there anything I can do to help you keep order tomorrow night?” she asked.

There wasn’t. He gave her little part in that. He thought about it, then invited a few of his friends to have dinner with him that night. This was something he had done often before. It would raise little interest among the Garkohn at the settlement. Two Garkohn did attend invisibly for a while, but they soon left, having heard enough talk of crops, rabbits, chickens, etc.

Alanna signaled Jules when they were gone and he made a short announcement. A brother of one of the men scheduled to guard the gate the next night was present. Also present was the father of a man scheduled to help guard the Tehkohn prisoners. Alanna had wanted to be more direct—speak with at least two of the actual guards so that the information would only have to be transmitted once more. Her goal was not to prevent Natahk from learning that the dinner had taken place, and understanding through hindsight why certain guests had been invited. Unlike Jules, she believed that that would happen anyway—that it was inevitable. Her goal was only to prevent Natahk’s learning too soon. She wanted to be certain that the Garkohn at the settlement had no reason to suspect that anything was wrong. If they did suspect, if they signaled Natahk and Natahk arrived with an army, the Missionaries could be crushed between the two warring tribes. No punishment that Natahk was likely to inflict on the settlement after the raid would hurt the Missionaries as badly as would being caught in that vise.

But by Jules’s roundabout plan, the two special guests would speak to their relatives, and the relatives would speak to their fellow guards. The best that Alanna had been able to do was to convince Jules that at least the orders should not be relayed until the next night—until the last minute. That way, even if someone did fail to notice a lurking Garkohn, it would be too late for the Garkohn to contact Natahk and turn the raid into a war.

The other guests at Jules’s dinner were to speak to no one. Their only function would be to do what they could to stop any trouble that arose before Missionaries could be hurt. Jules was emphasizing the importance of his instructions and at the same time undergoing some

intense questioning when a late-arriving guest knocked and had to be let in. Alanna caught Jules's eye to lei him know that a Garkohn had come in with the guest. That ended the business portion of the dinner.

The escape the next night began well. Both sets of Missionary guards received their warnings and behaved as they had been told to behave. And apparently, the Garkohn remained ignorant until the raid was in progress. The only trouble came when a Tehkohn hunter, hard-pressed by the Garkohn, and impatient with the unfamiliar latch on the storehouse door, kicked the door in. The sudden noise brought several Missionaries spilling carelessly out of their houses.

Someone shouted that the Tehkohn were raiding.

Someone else called for the men to get their guns.

Then one of the men who had had dinner with Jules the night before shouted, "Get back inside! You can't tell one native from another in the dark. Let them fight it out"

Only two young men did not hear him—or chose not to heed. Their home was near the storehouse, and they moved quickly. They managed to tackle a pair of escaping prisoners. The prisoners, both hunters, paused a moment to break their attackers' necks, then fled on. Raiders and ex-prisoners combined to dispose of the few Garkohn who got in their way. Then they left the settlement, carrying their own dead and injured with them.

The dead Missionaries were brothers, Kyle and Lee Everett. Alanna had known them. One of her few friends among the Missionaries had been their sister, Tate, who had been taken by the Garkohn over a year before. It occurred to Alanna that the memory of their sister might have been what spurred the two men to run so recklessly into danger. They would have been infuriated at seeing the Tehkohn escaping since, like most Missionaries, they had still believed that the Tehkohn were responsible for all the abductions. Jules had not dared to risk the chaos that might follow a general announcement of the truth.

And, Alanna thought unhappily, Jules had been right. Just as she had been right not to try to convince the prisoners that the Missionaries were not their enemies, and thus should be handled gently. The prisoners would not have believed her and more important, the Garkohn might have overheard. Her fear of the Garkohn and Jules's fear of the temper of his people—their temper and their guns—had killed Kyle and Lee, but had doubtless saved many others.

Most Missionaries did not realize that anything had happened until early the next morning when Natahk arrived with an army of hunters. The First Hunter was as angry as Alanna had expected him to be. He and Gehl came straight to the Verrick house. Natahk was

luminescent yellow in his fury. He stood looking from one to another of the three Verricks until his eyes came to rest on Jules. “I have heard that you were sick, Verrick, confined to your bed for days.”

He stopped, clearly waiting to trample any defense Jules made. Jules said nothing.

“Was it your sickness that prevented you from hearing the Tehkohn who came raiding last night? Were you asleep in your bed while they slaughtered my hunters and freed the prisoners?”

“I heard them,” said Jules. And his tone caused Alanna to turn and look at him with apprehension. He sounded the way he had the night before when he stood over the bodies of the Everett brothers—the way he had when he stopped blaming himself and began blaming the natives. All the natives.

“You heard?” Natahk feigned surprise. “And you did nothing? Called none of your people to the aid of my outnumbered hunters?”

“To what purpose?” demanded Jules. “So that the Tehkohn could be diverted to killing Missionaries while your hunters escaped?”

Natahk’s luminescence seemed to intensify, probably because Jules had guessed exactly right.

“Would you like to see the bodies of the two men who did try to help your hunters?” asked Jules.

Natahk struck him openhanded across the face.

Jules reeled back against the wall and fell, upsetting a small chest that contained Neila’s cooking utensils. The chest spilled its contents over the floor as Natahk spoke.

“What do I care for your two men—two fools who gave their necks to the Tehkohn—when I have lost twelve hunters!” He went to the dining table where a bowl of meklah fruit still sat—for Neila and for guests. He took a piece of fruit, turned, and threw it hard so that it half smashed against Jules’s chest. “Eat, Verrick.”

Alanna saw Jules’s hand move to where Neila’s large butcher knife had fallen out of the chest. He grasped the knife, his body hiding the action from Natahk. Then in a single motion, he rose to his feet and lunged at the Garkohn.

Alanna had quietly placed herself between Jules and Natahk, off to one side. Now she moved as Jules did, hit him with her full weight before he could reach Natahk. She caught his right wrist with both her hands and twisted it as they fell. He released the knife and it went skittering across the floor to the wall.

Jules jerked free of Alanna and thrust her away from him. She got up, looked at Natahk, who had not moved, then looked at Jules, who glared back at her. Neila, frightened and confused by the brief incident, now started to Jules’s side. But she stopped when she saw his expression. Alanna offered him her hand.

He got up, ignoring the hand, and faced Natahk. There was no change in the Garkohn's seemingly placid face, but his coloring was still bright yellow.

"You will eat," he said softly.

Jules must have known the threat behind the gentled voice. Containing his humiliation somehow, he went to the table, took a meklah fruit, ate it. Behind him, Neila began to cry.

Natahk went to where the knife had finally come to rest and picked it up. He turned it over in his hands for a moment, then spoke to his second-in-command. "Do we not have hunters with us who know the locations of all the Missionary weapons?"

Gehl flashed white in a luminescent Kohn nod.

"Tell them to collect the weapons."

"Oh, God, no!" Jules spoke more to himself than to the Garkohn. Then, "No, Natahk! There will be killing!"

The Garkohn leader glanced at him and Gehl stopped to see if there would be a change in her orders.

"Natahk, my people will fight to keep their weapons. There will be pointless carnage." He seemed to have to force the next words out. "Take my weapons if you wish. I'm the one who threatened you. But leave my people alone."

Natahk hefted the knife again and smiled humanly. He spoke to Gehl. "Tell them not to worry about these." He indicated the knife. "An adult hunter who cannot overcome a Missionary armed with this deserves to die. But see that they collect the others. The strange ones." He meant the guns.

Gehl flashed assent again and went out.

Neila approached Jules again and the two exchanged looks of apprehension. Jules started toward the door, then stopped, and in what must have been a painful gesture, looked at Natahk.

No longer smiling, the Garkohn flashed a nod—a dismissal.

Jules and Neila hurried out, doubtless intent on doing what they could to hold down the carnage.

Alanna stared after them, then looked at Natahk and found him watching her.

"Why did you save him?" he asked.

"He is my father!" she said hotly. Then, watching him, she cooled, performed the mental gymnastics necessary to keep her calm and safe from the rage that had almost destroyed Jules. "Why did you spare him?" she countered.

Natahk made a sound of derision. "He has his uses. And sometimes I pity him. He always fights, yet he must always lose."

She looked at him with surprise, wondering whether he meant it, whether he was capable of even such a condescending sympathetic

emotion as pity. “Will your hunters kill?” she asked, glancing toward the door.

“If they must. Verrick will do what he can to make it unnecessary, and you will do what you can. But if they fight us, some of them will die.”

“You want me to help?”

“Of course. I expect you to be very useful in helping me control your people.”

She stood still, saying nothing. Was this why he had kept her secret and let her remain unaddicted? Because she too had her uses? If that was it, then he must have finally believed her claim that she preferred death to the meklah. Perhaps he feared that she would kill herself in a third withdrawal. But he was not finished.

“I demand little of you really. You would try to keep them out of danger on your own as you just did with Verrick. You do care for them to a surprising extent—surprising considering where your true loyalties lie.”

“I care for them.”

“Show your usefulness then. And perhaps I will begin to forget what you were. Except in one way.” He paused. “Your husband was teaching you to fight.”

“Yes.”

“You move well, and quickly. I will see that your training is continued.”

She ignored this.

“Our Missionaries in the south are also being trained. Most have little strength, but it is surprising what they can be motivated to do.”

Imagining the “motivations,” Alanna felt sick and angry. She moved away from him toward the door. She was about to go out when something occurred to her. “Will you tell Tate Everett that her brothers are dead?”

“So? They were the ones then.”

“Yes.”

“You will tell her yourself. You will see her soon.”

Alanna managed to conceal her sudden fear. “So?”

“Yes, Alanna. Your people are not safe here. The Tehkohn come raiding whenever they wish. Innocent Missionaries are killed. Soon, I must move you all south—where you will be safe.”

He was an animal. He was the one native about whom the Missionaries had been right!

“When?” Alanna demanded.

“Be grateful that I do not tell you. If I did, if I gave you a false time, I have no doubt that Tehkohn would appear at exactly that time. Then I would have to kill you even before I dealt with them. Now go

and join your people."

They went outside together, and for a moment stood in front of the Verrick house and watched. Garkohn hunters were driving Missionaries out of their homes. They were herding the bewildered people onto the common to be surrounded by other hunters. Hunters were already searching emptied houses. One of these last spotted Alanna and started toward her. Natahk waved him away.

"Go and appear to be one of them," he told her. "It will help you win their trust when the need arises."

She stiffened, spoke in flat controlled English. "They are my people. I don't need you to tell me how to handle them." She walked away without looking back at him.

The Missionaries had been rousted from their morning routines. Some had been driven from their homes only partially clad and more than one was wrapped in only a blanket. The Garkohn action had taken them completely by surprise. They were angry, confused, and in many cases, badly frightened people. Here and there, some of them protested to the silent stolid Garkohn, but the Garkohn ignored them unless they tried to break away from the group and return to their homes. Then they were handled with a swift efficient brutality that usually left them unconscious on the ground—and that warned their neighbors against any similar attempt. A well-trained Kohn fighter—even a low hunter—was much used to killing with his hands.

Near where Alanna stood, Garkohn-Missionary cultural differences caused a problem as five Missionary men leaped to the defense of a hysterical woman who had tried to break through the ring of Garkohn. The speed and fury of the Missionaries' attack not only stopped the two Garkohn from beating the woman, but very nearly overcame them. Finally, the Garkohn managed to dispose of three of their attackers while the other two dragged the screaming woman back into the crowd. Other men moved to the outside of the crowd to face the approaching Garkohn, protecting their own, taking action against an attacking enemy. This was something that they could understand!

Jules Verrick reached them before Alanna did, and stood off the Garkohn in exactly the right way.

"What do you want? Will you stoop to murdering nonfighters?"

The yellower of the two Garkohn, a huntress, raised a hand to strike Jules out of the way, but her companion stopped her.

"Send out the ones who attacked us," he ordered.

"They attacked in the defense of the nonfighter you were beating. It was their duty."

Both Garkohn were silent for a moment, then the darker one flared angry yellow. "Your people are too much alike! Who can tell

fighters from nonfighters?" He turned away with a mixture of anger and humiliation. The huntress followed.

The status of nonfighters—farmers and artisans—was in some ways similar to that of women in Missionary society. Fighters protected them, governed them, and considered it less than honorable to mistreat them. They ranged from the bright green of the highest farmers to the startlingly beautiful golden green of the artisans. Among the Garkohn, there were even artisans who descended to pure yellow. Nonfighters were the only truly beautiful people that Alanna had seen among the Kohn.

Jules turned from the retreating Garkohn and faced his people. He spoke only loud enough for those closest to him, those involved in the incident, to hear. "If we panic, we can die as uselessly, as foolishly, as the Everett brothers died last night. Yes, we lost them. They mixed into fighting between the Tehkohn and the Garkohn. They acted without thinking." He had to raise his voice to be heard over their exclamations of shock. "We are not cowards," he told them. "If we have to fight, we will. Only remember that we may be all that's left of the human race, and that every time one of us dies, we decrease the chances of human survival as well as our own chances to fulfill the Mission!"

They were accustomed to obeying him, accepting his judgment. And he had invoked a powerful persuader in the Mission. They calmed and resigned themselves to staring their hostility at the Garkohn.

Then someone noticed what the Garkohn were bringing out of the houses and the calm vanished.

Several people called out, alerting the entire group to the fact that they were losing their weapons. Several more tried to break through the Garkohn circle. Abruptly, the colony was only seconds from the chaos Jules had envisioned. And Alanna thought it would take more than an inspirational speech to calm them this time. They would have to be shocked into submission.

She looked around for Natahk, saw that he had come closer to the circle. He was talking to a huntress not far from the outer fringe of Garkohn. She hurried toward him. A hunter of the circle tried to stop her, struck at her in the careless way that Garkohn reserved for slow untrained Missionaries. He appeared startled when she managed to avoid him. He tried again, not underestimating her this time, but he was simply not fast enough. She reached Natahk several steps ahead of him and Natahk stopped him and ordered him back to the circle. The huntress had just turned away from Natahk. He looked at Alanna questioningly.

He was holding what Alanna needed. She had seen it in his hand as she approached. Apparently, he had taken it from the huntress.

"Give me the gun, Natahk."

He glanced down at the huge ancient .44 magnum revolver he held. Then he looked at her again, uncomprehending.

"Give it to me before your people have to start killing."

He looked at the deteriorating situation on the common, saw two Missionaries beating down a hunter who, surprisingly enough, was trying not to kill them. But they were big men, strong in their own right. The hunter gave up and broke their necks.

Natahk handed the heavy gun to Alanna, all the while watching her with an intensity that she barely noticed. She fumbled with the gun for a moment, seeing that it was loaded, remembering… It had been a long time since she had last fired a gun. She had never fired one this large. But its size was a good thing. It would make plenty of noise.

Alanna went back inside the circle of Garkohn, Natahk ordering a path opened for her. She moved to the highest ground she could find, a slight rise from which all the Missionaries could see her, but where none could reach her without alerting the Garkohn. She held the gun with both hands, fired diagonally into the ground. The savage recoil sent a shock of pain through her hands, but it was worth it. She had been right about the noise. It was deafening. It got her the attention of every person on the common instantly. She used none of Jules's diplomacy.

"We're outnumbered," she yelled. "Some of us are already dead. Take a look around. Then if you want to commit suicide, start fighting again."

She stood where she was and watched them unfreeze. Watched them look numbly at each other, and at the surrounding Garkohn. Watched them become sheep again—discontented sheep, but sheep nevertheless. She closed her eyes and lowered her head so that her hair hid her face. They tried so hard to die while she was trying so hard to save them. If only they would be still until Diut opened a way of escape for them.

She was aware of Natahk coming to stand beside her. He did not startle her when he spoke.

"The weapon, Alanna."

She handed it to him without hesitation. "You were wrong to collect them."

"I was wrong not to collect them sooner. Do you understand what would have happened, had your father chosen to use one of them against me instead of the knife?"

"Yes."

"I am not Hao, but I am my people's leader. They would make the Missionaries pay many times over. It would be a matter of honor."

“I said I understood.” She shook her head. Ironically, he was right. In a way, he was saving the Missionaries from themselves—saving them from the retribution that would surely come as soon as any Missionary was goaded into killing any Garkohn, however much the Garkohn needed killing.

Alanna watched a party of Garkohn leave the settlement. They were carrying some of the weapons and pulling others in one of the Missionaries’ handcarts. They left triumphantly, fighters who had won their battle, while most of their fellows stayed behind to guard the Missionaries. As soon as the gates were closed behind them, Natahk gestured Alanna away from him so that he stood alone on the rise. Then he demanded the Missionaries’ attention.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Alanna

Diut made me known to the people who were important to him. Jeh and Cheah, who were his friends, now became true friends of mine rather than superiors. It was an easy transition. I was not surprised when Cheah told me how concerned she and Jeh had been when Jeh took me to Diut. They had seen the terror in me and they were afraid Diut would be offended, yet they could do nothing. Cheah grayed just slightly when she told me: “It is never easy to see one friend kill another.” She spoke as though from experience and I wondered what pain she was remembering.

I met Diut’s First Judge, a woman as tall as Diut himself but, of course, without the heavy Hao musculature. Her coloring was excellent and her strength and fighting ability second only to Diut’s. She was Kehyo, the first Tehkohn woman to make me feel small—and not only with her larger size.

“You are Alanna,” she said when I met her. The occasion was a traditional gathering held to announce her third pregnancy. It was not the formal welcoming ceremony that would be held after the child’s birth, but only a gathering of friends that a couple held to share their joy and receive the good wishes of the bluest people they knew. I had not been invited, but Diut had. He took me along. Now Kehyo had come to sit near me.

“I have heard about you,” she said. “You are Diut’s furless one.”

I smiled a little. “Yes.”

“I hear that you hunt very well.”

“I’m learning.”

“But only with weapons.”

I hesitated. “Yes.” All Kohn who hunted used weapons sooner or later, but only I used weapons all the time. For that reason more than

any other, Diut was teaching me to fight in the Kohn way. Other fighters would see my weapon, he said, and they would think I was nothing without it. I would be challenged as soon as he pronounced me a fighter and a judge as he planned to do. I was lucky. The Kohn way of fighting was only slightly more restrictive than the no-holds-barred wildland fighting that I had known on Earth. I was forbidden from snatching up a stone, knife, or other object to use against a weaponless person, but all else was permitted. All the things the Missionaries said were wrong—and some things the Missionaries did not even seem to know about.

"You're unfortunate," said Kehyo. "Alone and weaponless, you would surely die. You must stay close to the dwelling so that others can protect you."

I turned to glare at her. Her coloring was absolutely neutral, as though she had spoken out of true concern for me. But I could feel her malice. Her even blue-green was a lie.

"First Judge," I said, "I was left alone and weaponless in a land far more savage than this when I was no older than your young daughter. As you can see, I survived very well."

"It was not a place where the jehruk roamed, apparently. I have heard that you have difficulty even seeing the jehruk."

Before I could answer that, Diut was there kneeling beside Kehyo, his hand resting seemingly casually on her shoulder. Kehyo's body tensed. She knew the threat of that hand.

Diut said nothing, only looked at her. Her haughtiness fell away as she met his eyes and her coloring faded to submissive yellow.

"The child within you protects you," said Diut. "It will not protect you again."

She lowered her head.

Diut looked at me. "Let it end here."

I nodded. But later that night when we were alone, I tried to find out just what the trouble was.

"She has an old quarrel with me," said Diut. "Or with herself. It does not concern you. She came to insult you only because we are mated."

"But what…"

"Not now, Alanna. She won't bother you again. Sleep now. In the morning you have a mock duel with Jeh."

I slept, and still managed to lose my mock duel. The antiweapon rule hurt me more than I liked. Kehyo's words returned to sting me.

In the afternoon, I went to see another of my new acquaintances, the most powerful of them, Tahneh, the older Tehkohn Hao. She had the Hao stockiness and height and she held her body straight in spite of her age. The people obeyed her, respected her, but her blue was

marred by splotches of yellow, some as large as her open hand, and some smaller. Age spots, they were called. They came to all Kohn who lived past middle age, and when they came, Kohn who had been fighters fought no longer. They retired to the inner apartments and helped to instruct the older children in the ways of their individual clans. Also, they helped keep the records that gave continuity to Tehkohn history. They worked as much as they wished and only if they wished. No one drove them.

Tahneh was working now on an interweaving of the history of her original people, the Rohkohn, and the Tehkohn, who had become her people. Years before when Diut was only a boy, he had crossed the mountains to the desert and the sea, and been captured by the Rohkohn. He was a valuable thing to them—a young Hao to succeed Tahneh, who was already in her middle years and childless. But Diut had had the good luck to stumble upon the Rohkohn while they were in the midst of a drought. What rivers there had been in their territory had dried up and the Rohkohn faced slow death. Conditions in the mountains had been dry also—thus the lesser runoff from the snows down to the Rohkohn—but the Tehkohn still had the rivers at their altitude. They had no real problem. In spite of Diut's youth, he had talked Tahneh into joining him in the mountains—this instead of maiming him to keep him in the desert. The two Hao began a liaison —the first of several—and there were other Tehkohn-Rohkohn matings, some of which produced children. A tie was formed and the two tribes became one. Now, in the multicolored ancient Kohn script, Tahneh wrote of that blending. She was still childless but she had a more or less permanent liaison now with Ehreh, her old Rohkohn First Judge. She obviously cared for him, but there was still a great deal of love between her and Diut. I wondered whether it was their physical similarity—the fact that they were both Hao—that made them close. I already knew how lonely it was to be one of a kind among more homogeneous people—even people who were kind.

I found myself liking Tahneh at once even though I envied her closeness with Diut. I understood myself well enough to realize that I would have envied anyone who was close to Diut. Because Diut had slowly become my shield against the feelings of loneliness and isolation that I had to contend with now that I had less work to keep me busy. He no longer beat me and he repaid my co-operation and growing Tehkohn skills with gentleness and attention. He was remaking me more thoroughly than had the artisans before him. And I was letting him do it, and letting myself be tied to him far more tightly than I should have. Even Tahneh could see that.

"You must be careful," she said to me as we sat together in her apartment on the fleecy skin of a huge leaf eater. There was a low

wooden stand before her like the easel a Missionary woman I had known used to hold canvas when she painted. Near Tahneh were the several polished-stone jugs that held her paints. There was a tray of brushes. There was a jug of something—not water—that she used to clean the brushes. There was a stack of thick, heavy, very white Tehkohn paper made from a plant that grew near the river. And there was Tahneh, drawing thin, angular Kohn characters with one brush after another. We were alone in the apartment. “Be careful,” she repeated. “It is only a liaison you have with him.”

I turned to frown at her.

“Keep your anger,” she said. “I mean only that you would not be the first to be hurt simply because a liaison ended as it must end.” She read me almost as well as Diut did.

“I know…that it must.”

“It is always hard for a woman to leave him. It was hard for me.”

I looked at her curiously, wondering how it must have been for her, loving a man who could have been her son. But the Kohn seemed to have no prejudices against such things. “It will be hard,” I said. “But I know I cannot hold him—though you could have, surely.”

“Now?” she asked, gesturing toward her spotted body.

“Even now, perhaps. But before the spots came, surely.”

“No.”

I frowned, not believing her, but not wanting to say so.

“He is still young, Alanna. He may yet find the woman who can give him children. Not that his childlessness is the fault of the women he has known. But he still hopes.”

“You mean…you mean he can’t…?”

“He is Hao. The blue often brings sorrow as well as power. I tried for as long as there was any hope to find a man who could give me a child. So often, Hao come out of the air, born to judges—not even high judges. But my father and both Diut’s parents were Hao. Diut and I both grew up certain that we too would produce children. It is hard to see that dream die.”

I said nothing for several seconds. Then finally, “I wondered why he had no wife.”

Tahneh’s blue yellowed to green. “It is a capricious thing. No Hao ever knows for sure until the time comes to take a mate, until several mates have been taken without result.”

“I see.”

“See too that he is near to giving up. And he cares deeply for you, Alanna. I think your strangeness pleases him more than he would say. Part from him without trouble when he asks it, and he will call you back after a little time.”

“As with you?”

"With me it was different. You know that."

"…yes." I faced her squarely. "Did he tell you to advise me?"

"I'm not subject to his orders, Alanna. He does not tell me what to say." Her blue glowed softly as she spoke. "I advise you because you need advice—and because I can see that he cares for you, and you for him. Sometimes I can see your anger when he looks at me. You can never take my place with him, but if you follow my advice, you can build a place for yourself. And also…" She stopped.

"What?"

"You can save yourself from Kehyo's mistake."

I sat still, watching her, knowing that I was close to finding out what Diut had refused to tell me. "What mistake?"

"He has told you nothing of her, even after last night?"

I glanced down, did not answer. Tahneh had not been present at the gathering the night before. But the Tehkohn dwelling was similar in at least one way to the Mission colony. There were no secrets.

Tahneh nickered iridescent for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. "She was his first mate, Alanna. She is the daughter of his mother's brother. His mother came out of the air and she had a brother who was a judge."

"Cousins!" I said startled. "He said nothing even of that."

"They grew up together," said Tahneh. "It is often done that way when there are cousins of similar age. They are placed with the same nonfighter second-parents so that when their time comes, they know each other well. There is no fear of rejection or ridicule. But Kehyo tied herself too tightly to him that first time. They came together once more later, but after that, Kehyo had a child by one of her judge mates, now her husband, Kahlahtkai. Sometimes I wonder if she has ever forgiven Kahlahtkai for that.

"Most often, she is reasonable and deserving of her high position. Diut has gambled much on her in war. But she is not content with her husband. She cannot seem to rid herself of the idea that she might have had a child by Diut if she had had one more liaison with him. Sometimes she seeks to frighten or humiliate Diut's mates. She has been quiet recently, belatedly taking pleasure in her two older children, and perhaps maturing a little. Also, Diut has beaten her twice over this. Until last night, I thought she had given it up, but perhaps your differences incite her."

"Will she challenge?"

"Not while you are with Diut. He has warned her. He cares deeply for her but if she tries that again, he will surely kill her."

She had tried it before then. "What about when I…when our liaison has ended—and when she has had her child?"

"When you leave Diut, that should end her reason for resenting

you."

"Should."

"She is a fool about this one thing. Who can say what she will do. Don't worry about her though, Alanna. I don't think Diut will let her interfere with you."

But I did worry. When I left Tahneh, it was to look for Diut and find out what I could do to speed my training. I had a new reason now for wanting to become the best fighter that I could as soon as I could.

Natahk stood before the Missionaries gathered on the common and commanded them exactly as he would have commanded Garkohn.

"You will return to your homes and gather as many of your possessions as you can carry," he said. "At least one of my hunters will watch in each house with you. When you have finished, you will return here and wait until the rest of your people are ready. Then, together, you will be moved south where you will make a new settlement, away from raiding Tehkohn."

The people stared at him in shock, then looked at each other. Now that they had been disarmed, they were being abducted. What could they do? They called out to Natahk, to Jules, to each other. They argued and shouted and drowned each other out. Jules came out of the crowd to stand beside Natahk.

"Do as the First Hunter says," he ordered quickly. "Obey him! We can replace buildings and fields if we must. We can't replace lives."

There was silence for a moment as the people digested this. Then someone called out: "But our homes…! Our crops…!"

"We've built new homes before," said Jules. "And we have enough seed and enough time to plant new crops. We can start again. Whatever happens, we must start again."

"Go to your homes," commanded Natahk. "Do as I have told you."

"What about all the work we've done here?" Alanna could see that the speaker was John Williamson, a square burly man who served as the settlement blacksmith. "Just how much can we walk away from and still survive as civilized people."

"Obey!" roared Natahk. "Or you will not survive at all!"

No one dared speak in the face of the naked threat. There were already five bodies strewn around within the circle of Garkohn. Resistance would clearly not be tolerated. Slowly, hesitantly, the crowd began to fragment into smaller groups. The ring of Garkohn fragmented also, at least one going with each family group. Alanna noticed that the heavily muscled Williamson and his grown son drew three Garkohn. The natives were taking no chances.

Alanna came up to Jules and Natahk just in time to hear Jules speak in a low strained voice.

“Why couldn’t you have warned me that you planned to do this? Are you just trying to drive them to violence so that you’ll have reason to kill them?”

Natahk looked at him coldly. “I already have twelve reasons to kill them, Verrick. The twelve fighters that I lost last night. Be grateful that I do not use those reasons.”

He started to walk away. Jules and Alanna followed when they realized that he was going toward the Verrick house. Neila was already there with Gehl. No doubt it was because of Gehl that Neila was gathering food, clothing, and tools to load onto Jules’s handcart. Like everyone else, she appeared confused, angry, and frightened.

Natahk spoke to Gehl. “Keep watch outside. Bring me word when they have all gathered. If there is trouble, kill.”

Gehl flashed white, glanced briefly at Alanna, and went out.

Natahk sat down, looked at Jules. “Sit, Verrick, and we will talk.”

Jules obeyed. Alanna, wanting as little to do with Natahk as possible, moved away to help Neila pack.

“Alanna!” said Natahk sharply.

She stopped as she was about to enter her bedroom where Neila had gone. She turned to face Natahk. He said nothing more, but after a moment she returned tight-lipped to sit in Neila’s chair.

He watched her with something between amusement and contempt. “Did you think that I would tell you any part of my plans and then leave you to warn the Tehkohn?”

She did not answer.

Natahk looked at Jules. “She has led you foolishly, and you have followed. Were you completely unable to see that you were endangering your own people?”

“Was I?” said Jules. “By keeping them out of a battle that would have killed many of them?”

“What do you think the Tehkohn will do to you now that they no longer need fear for the safety of the prisoners?”

Jules opened his mouth to answer, then closed it. He could not tell the truth, and apparently, he had not yet thought of a lie that would fit.

“You have made some arrangement with the Tehkohn,” Natahk accused. “That is what I thought. They made you a few lying promises to save their people. And now that they have their people, how much do you think their promises are worth?”

Jules leaned back, watching Natahk. “I don’t think I could do any worse trusting the Tehkohn than I did trusting you.”

Natahk shrugged humanly. “I have never asked for your trust, Verrick. I am not asking for it now. I am telling you that it is in the best interests of the Tehkohn to kill you now before you can be of

further use to me. That is why I am moving you. To save your foolish lives."

Alanna was startled to realize that Natahk was completely serious. He was not mocking now, in spite of his anger. He believed what he was saying. And, from his point of view, he was right. He knew of no reason for the Tehkohn not to move against the Missionaries. The trouble was, neither did Jules, really. He was simply, desperately, trusting Diut, trusting Alanna. If only he could hold that trust.

"With our weapons," said Jules, "we would have been willing to face the Tehkohn."

Natahk sighed. "With your weapons, you would have been willing to face anyone, including Garkohn. Your weapons helped to make you foolish. Without them, perhaps it will be possible for you to learn." He looked from Jules to Alanna. "Begin teaching your father. Tell him what he is."

"What he is?" asked Alanna frowning.

"What you are, what all Missionaries are now. Perhaps he will understand, hearing it from you."

"Oh." She knew what he wanted her to say, and the anger in his voice told her that it would do no good to protest. But her fear now that his plan might become a reality—that the Missionaries would be dragged away south before Diut could prevent it—made her protest anyway. "There is no need, Natahk. He knows. You have told him yourself."

"Let him hear it again."

She sat in silence, knowing that it was not only Jules that he was trying to reach. She was the actual collaborator, and Natahk knew it. She wondered whether he had some special punishment in mind for her. If he did, his sudden move now might give him the chance to carry it out.

"Alanna!"

Resigned, she spoke as though reciting. "We are a Garkohn people, united under your leadership with the other Garkohn of the valley."

"Not nearly as united as you will be," said Natahk. He looked at Jules. "Do you think I would accept a group of people so childishly weak that they fight only with the aid of weapons, and so without honor that they would use those weapons against other Garkohn?"

"All right," said Jules. "You've stripped us. We can't fight you. What happens now? Do we become your new judges?"

Natahk ignored his manner, answered the question seriously. "What happens after you are settled in the south is up to you, Verrick. You will become whatever you can become. It is possible that you will

rouse yourselves and learn to fight, show the strength and stability you will need to become a fighter clan. Then, you may be judges of a *kind*, though with your blueless coloring, you will never command hunters. Or you might find your physical handicaps too great and become merely another nonfighter clan."

Alanna spoke up. "You hope for the former and expect the latter, don't you?"

He looked at her mildly. "Your minds are good. And we can use you either way. But we need fighters more than nonfighters."

"What of our needs?"

"Your… Mission?"

"At the very least," said Jules, "our Mission."

"Fulfill it. Breed, multiply, teach your young the glories of their past—as long as you can remember them. And as long as you remember that you are a part of us, subject to the orders of the First Hunter. You must change your thinking toward us, Verrick. You must learn the ways of the other clans so that you can deal with them without giving offense—just as they must learn your ways. And you must accept the tie. Other than that, you are free to stay together and live as you wish."

"You make it sound deceptively simple," said Alanna.

"It is simple," said Natahk. "You should be able to obey without trouble. Especially without the kind of trouble you have had. I think you know that Garkohn clans do not deal separately with non-Garkohn peoples. Especially not with proven enemies of the Garkohn." He paused, looked from Alanna to Jules. "Do you both understand what would be done to a hunter or an artisan or a farmer caught working with the Tehkohn?"

"We understand," said Alanna quickly. She was not eager to hear gruesome descriptions of Garkohn tortures. Diut had told her enough about them.

"I am not certain that Verrick knows, Alanna." His tone made her wish that she had not spoken. Again he was going to make her recite —ostensibly for Jules. And again the threat was actually for her. "You will tell him," Natahk ordered.

This time she was frightened enough not to argue. She spoke low-voiced to Jules. "A person caught working with an enemy tribe is painted red all over, and then he is blinded. They burn out his eyes. And they burn his hands until they can see that he will never use them again. Then they tie him with rope around his neck in the center of their dwelling, and wait to see whether or not he will live. If he lives, heals, they burn his legs. They burn behind the knee until the lower leg is useless. After that, he has to go on all fours if he wants to move. If he still lives, they keep him for sport, still tied by the neck like some

special kind of animal, until someone gets too rough with him and he dies." She shuddered. "I have heard that some of them live a very long time."

"That part is wrong," said Natahk. "You should have been told that they cease to live as soon as they betray their people."

Jules looked at him with disgust. "All right, Natahk. You've made your point."

"Have I? Do you understand that you have already earned this punishment—you and your daughter?"

Jules said nothing, sat very straight, waiting.

"Perhaps you were ignorant of the possible consequences of your betrayal, but you can see that Alanna was not. And I have no doubt that whatever contact you had with the Tehkohn was arranged through her."

Alarmed, Jules cut him off. "Now just a moment, Natahk—"

"Be still!" Natahk did not raise his voice but Jules fell silent as though he had shouted. "She does not deny it. Why should you?"

Jules looked at Alanna and she looked back expressionlessly.

Natahk went on. "Your lives are mine. Only I can save them. Only I can deny justice to the twelve families who lost kinsmen last night."

Jules watched him closely. "You intend to do this then. And this talk of torture is only to frighten us."

"It is to warn you, Verrick. I will intercede for you now, but I will not do it again. And even now, I expect to be paid for the protection that I give. I expect you to accept yourselves as Garkohn, and then turn and help your people to do the same. I want your word that you will do this."

"You want too much," said Jules.

"So? Even in exchange for your life?"

"Shall I give you my word that I'll betray my people in exchange for my life? Would you believe me?"

Natahk whitened slightly. "What bargain shall we make then, Verrick? What will you give me in exchange for your life?"

Jules watched him silently for several seconds. "Nothing," he said finally. "I'll go on doing what I have to do. I can't promise anyone more than that."

The white went out of Natahk's body and his normal green glowed with the intensity of his emotions. "You choose death then?"

Jules tensed. "If that's the only alternative."

Natahk stared at him for several seconds. Then he smiled. "I have heard Alanna speak this way. She was lying. I think you are lying too."

Jules shrugged.

"You Missionaries find it very easy to say you would rather die

than do this or that. But you won't die, Verrick. And you will learn, to obey me. Because each time you disobey, I will kill one of your people."

"What!"

"I will begin with Alanna."

Jules turned to look at Alanna.

"Relations between us were much simpler before she was returned to you," said Natahk. "Without her, they will become simple again. And you, remembering her, will become much more tractable."

Neila came out of the bedroom where she had obviously been listening, and stood staring first at Natahk, then at Jules. Alanna watched them all as though nothing they said had anything to do with her. Jules was bluffing, feeling himself too valuable to be casually murdered. Natahk was bluffing. He might kill others, but he had no intention of killing Alanna. Not yet. Jules was trying to salvage pride, and Natahk was trying to intimidate. A game then. One miscalculation from either of them, and the people would be destroyed because of the outcome of a game.

"Jules…" said Neila softly.

Jules glanced at her.

"You can't let him…" She went to stand beside Alanna, put an arm around her protectively.

"You won't do it," said Jules to Natahk. "You won't kill my daughter and then expect me to co-operate with you."

Natahk stood up, stepped toward Alanna, and Alanna deliberately entered the game on Natahk's side. She stood quickly, as though frightened, and moved so that her chair was between herself and Natahk.

"Jules!" cried Neila once more.

"All right!" Jules was on his feet. "Stop!" For his daughter, for his pleading wife, he could do what he refused to do for himself.

Natahk stopped, looked at him.

"I'll do as you say. Leave them alone."

"What will you do?"

"I'll… I'll try to guide my people in the way you want, help them to accept their new lives…and you."

"You don't believe what you're saying," said Natahk. "But your saying it is a beginning. You will say it again, and again. You will act as though it was true in order to deceive me. You will deceive yourself instead. Your lie will become truth. You and your people are mine, Verrick."

Jules said nothing.

"In time," said Natahk more softly, "you will realize that there is no shame in your submission. I don't rule this valley through

weakness. And all who live here submit to me in one way or another."

Still, Jules was silent.

Watching him, Natahk whitened slowly, then just as slowly settled back to his normal green. "You are First Missionary then, Verrick. Go out to your people and see that no more of them throw their lives away. Take your wife with you. I want to speak privately with Alanna."

Alanna had not thought anything could bring Jules's resistance back so quickly.

"You want to… My God, Natahk, haven't you done enough? Can't you leave us any peace at all?"

"I want only to speak with her, Verrick. I won't harm her as long as you obey me."

Alanna spoke up quickly. "Jules, it's all right. I'm not afraid." She was, but her fear was for him. "Go, please. I'll be all right."

Jules stared at her with such a strange mixture of anger and concern that she was confused and silenced.

"My daughter?" he said to Natahk. "My house? You leave me no rights at all, do you, First Hunter?"

"The right to live your life with your family in peace, as long as you obey me. Go."

Alanna spoke up again. "Please, Jules. Go."

Jules looked from Natahk to Alanna, and finally to Neila. He gestured Neila to him, but she hesitated.

"Go," said Alanna urgently. "Don't let me be the cause of your getting hurt."

Neila went to Jules and they left the house together. Alanna looked after them sadly. Then she heard Natahk sit down again and she turned to face him. "You are destroying him."

"If he cannot change, he will be destroyed. He knows that."

Alanna sighed and sat down. "What do you want of me, Natahk?"

"A narrative. Reasonably detailed, true."

It was what she had expected—what he had promised her days before. She relaxed a little. "Where shall I begin?"

"With your capture."

She obeyed, telling her story easily, altering only those facts that would indicate that her husband was something more than a judge.

Natahk questioned her from time to time, but for the most part, he listened. She did not know how much he believed, did not care. She kept to the truth as much as she could because her story was so long. She wanted to be able to tell it over in the same way as many times as Natahk might wish without having to struggle to remember too many lies. But surprisingly, Natahk seemed content with one telling.

"Why are you still here?" he asked when she had finished. "You could have left with the prisoners—should have left with them."

She looked at him, startled. "Should have?"

"If you intended to rejoin your husband. It was your last chance."

She shrugged.

"You do not believe me. You still expect your Tehkohn friends to help you, even though you will be on your way south before noon."

Alanna said nothing. Let him worry. She would have been busy praying herself—if she had been Missionary enough to pray.

"You ask for punishment," said Natahk. "You challenge."

"I have said nothing."

"Yes." Natahk yellowed slightly. "Even your silences challenge. Why did you stay, Alanna?"

"To help my people."

"Which group?"

"The Missionaries. Do you think the Tehkohn need my help?"

"And what is it you want to help them do?"

"Live. In spite of your goading. In spite of their beliefs."

"That is a fragment of truth. Now tell me the rest."

"I…hoped to free them from the meklah."

"Why? The meklah does no harm as long as it is eaten regularly."

"And it does no good. Do you not withhold it to torture your captive Missionaries?"

"We withhold it until they obey—and they learn to obey very quickly. But are you less vulnerable to me because you are free of the meklah? Was your father?"

She did not answer.

"You planned for the Missionaries to leave the valley," he accused. "It is the only answer. But where were they to go?"

The truth? No. But what lie was possible? "I don't know."

He stood and came to face her. "I have not wanted to beat you."

She did not have to pretend fear. "When Jules talked with the Tehkohn Hao, Diut promised to move the Missionaries to a place of safety if they co-operated. And he promised to have them all killed if they refused."

Natahk stared at her, unbelieving. "Are you saying that he did nothing more than threaten, and Verrick believed?"

"Yes."

"Even though Diut was Verrick's prisoner at the time?"

Alanna manufactured cold anger. "And was he really a prisoner, First Hunter—yours or ours—when you forbade the Missionaries to paint him? When your own people obeyed him? Perhaps you would have believed his threats too if you had ever dared go near enough to him to hear him speak!"

She thought he would hit her. In fact, she expected him to hit her. She feared his strength less than she feared his questions now. But he only stood watching her. “You sided with the blue one, counseled your father to accept his word.”

Again, she did not feel that an answer was necessary.

“Even so, that should not have been enough. There is something missing. Something to do with your husband perhaps?”

“You know Jules doesn’t know about him.” She forced a note of bitterness into her voice. “And he’s out of favor with Diut—because of me. I only wish he did have enough influence to help.”

Natahk made a sound of disgust. “Somehow, you are lying. You are worthless. Gehl was right. She said it would be better to kill you.”

Had she? Then somehow Gehl too had noticed what Alanna could not help noticing. Natahk had been careless. But at least now, Alanna knew how to stop his questions. She looked at him calmly. “You are not going to kill me.”

He stared back at her for a moment without speaking. “So you realize that.” He whitened slightly. “We will speak of it then, in a moment. Were the Missionaries to be taken to the mountain dwelling?”

The question did not take her by surprise, but she chose to pretend that it had. She hesitated as though nervous, then answered, “I don’t know.”

“Don’t you?” His voice was comfortingly filled with suspicion. “And what use could the Tehkohn have for a tribe of your kind?”

She feigned annoyance. “Why bother to ask me questions if you’re not going to believe my answers?”

His coloring became iridescent, flecks of yellow glinting within the green. Doubt. “You are a worthy enemy, Alanna, with your half-truths and your lies. It will be interesting to reshape you and make you less of an enemy.”

“That, you will never do.” Deliberate challenge. But now was the time for it.

His iridescence faded to white. “Did I not say that all in this valley submitted to me? You will see. What was the name of your husband?”

“Natahk…” She shook her head. “Would you have me invent a name and give it to you?”

“I would have you obey me and answer my questions!”

“Yahnoh is my husband.”

Natahk lifted his head slightly. “I know of a Tehkohn judge called Yahnoh.”

“Of course. My husband.”

“‘Of course,’” he mimicked. “I think I will give you a meklah fruit

to swallow back your next lie with."

Frightened, Alanna said nothing. The risk had always been there. She might have to undergo a third withdrawal. But she was not weak or sick now. She would not sell either group of her people to avoid readdiction—any more than Jules had.

But Natahk's mood seemed to change. His anger faded and he moved closer to her. As he spoke he touched her throat lightly. "And even with that threat, I will not stop you from lying or counseling your Missionaries to side with the Tehkohn. But soon I will stop them from listening to you. I wonder if the Tehkohn have really found some use for them. Or if they only planned to kill them."

Alanna pulled away from the caressing fingers in disgust and stood up. At least he was diverted from his questioning.

"Be still," he said quietly. He touched her again. "Am I so different from your husband? After all, judge that he is, even he is not the leader of his people."

"He's my husband. What more does he have to be than that to bar your way?"

"A Tehkohn marriage means nothing to us."

She frowned at him. He was more right than he knew about one thing. He sounded far too much like Diut—like the Diut who had demanded a liaison with her such a short time ago. But Diut had changed, had allowed her to mold him as he molded her. And Diut was trying to help the Missionaries while Natahk was endangering them.

"Why should you want me?" she asked him. "You have Gehl now. You could have any other without trouble."

"You must become part of the tie," he said. "That will turn your people away from you so that you can no longer counsel them against me—also, it will protect you from their foolish customs. My only other choice would be to kill you and I don't want to do that. We're much alike, Alanna, you and I. I risk the anger of my hunters by saving and tying in with the Missionaries because I can see that in spite of the Missionaries' weakness, their knowledge will strengthen us. And you risk the anger, the savagery, of your people as you try to save them from me."

Another parallel. He was right, of course. However much she hated him, she and Natahk had similar goals—they worked for the good of their respective peoples. But they were not as alike as he wished. "I will not accept a liaison with you," she said.

"So? Shall I give you to another hunter? Or perhaps several other hunters until one of them becomes your husband."

"Why should you choose my mate? That is not the custom."

"But you have no blue." He smiled. "The power of the blue is a

lie. My people believe it. I only use it. I killed a hunter and huntress bluer than myself to become First Hunter." He clasped her throat between thumb and fingers, deliberately intimate. "And now, I will have the wife of a man blue enough to be called a judge—but not blue enough to stop me!"

Gehl opened the front door and came in.

Quickly, but seemingly casually, Natahk dropped his hand to his side. Knocking was not a Garkohn custom and Jules and Neila usually kept their door latched to avoid the most obvious intruders. But with all the recent coming and going, the latch had been left off. The Garkohn woman stood staring at Natahk and Alanna, noting, Alanna was certain, how close Natahk stood, and how Alanna had not moved away. Natahk had been bragging about his rank. Now Alanna remembered Gehl's. She too had fought her way up, killing those who opposed her. Natahk himself held the only authority she accepted.

Eyes downcast, Alanna stepped away from Natahk. She could not yellow as another Kohn would have, but she hoped Gehl would understand. Alanna felt no shame at giving way. With her incomplete training, she was not ready to face such an opponent even if she had considered Natahk a prize worth righting for—which she did not. Gehl could have him. In fact, as insurance against a possible future, Alanna hoped the huntress became pregnant.

Gehl spoke to Natahk. "There is trouble outside. Come out."

"Trouble with the Missionaries? I told you…"

"Not with them. Come out."

Natahk went to the door, then stopped as he noticed that Gehl remained behind. She was looking at Alanna. Natahk called her name once, sharply, then waited while she went out before him. When only Alanna could see him, he whitened considerably with amusement. He glanced at Alanna, then followed Gehl out the door, his coloring settling to normal.

After a moment, Alanna went to the door and looked out. There were a few Missionaries gathered on the common with bundles tied in blankets and handcarts haphazardly loaded. And a few Garkohn stood with them guarding them. But everyone's attention was on the scene at the gate where several more Garkohn were gathered. Alanna could see that three of these were spattered with red paint, or with blood. And one of them sat on the ground, half propped up against the wall. This one seemed to be unconscious. And it was this one that Alanna recognized. He was one of those who had left with the load of Missionary weapons. The others were also from the weapons party. What was left of the weapons party.

Alanna withdrew back into the house, smiling grimly. Jules and Neila came in and she startled them by hugging them in sudden

exuberant relief. Diut had not done the expected thing—had not taken his raiders and ex-prisoners and gone home to celebrate his successful raid. Perhaps it was nothing more than Alanna's stubbornness and his concern for her that had kept him in the valley, but Alanna thought otherwise. He had his people back now, and the Garkohn could not threaten him. He was ready to move.

CHAPTER NINE

Diut

I had decided to make Alanna a judge. She had just the right combination of speed and strength to hold her own among my judges and she was learning quickly. I trained her intensively because the time was near when I would break with her. I had first thought to keep her for only a season and thus make her acceptable to any others she might choose to mate with. Before I had her, I thought a season would be enough. Especially since she fought against coming to me at all.

But she and I found far more pleasure in each other than I had expected. We came to know each other first by touch, as blind people finding beauty with our hands that we could not see with our eyes. Her skin was smooth and firm, and yet soft. Very good to touch. And her hands seemed to wander by themselves through my fur. But there were times when I looked at her starkly naked ill-colored body and wondered how I could want to touch it. And her eyes were wrong—poorly protected and too round. She said they were more narrow than any of the Missionaries she had left in the Garkohn valley, but still they were too round to be pleasing. Her nose was too large. I asked her once whether it would be considered large among her people and she was offended. “It is very ordinary,” she said. And then added, “Some Missionaries think the Kohn have no noses.”

I let white into my coloring and seized her by her huge nose until she threatened to pull out a handful of my fur.

She taught me the caress called a “kiss” among her people, and then complained that I had no “lips” to kiss. It was not a caress any Kohn people would enjoy anyway. There was not enough to it. A joining of mouths, a thrust of tongues. That was all. It could not be felt as biting could. She learned to caress me as I preferred and I was

pleased. I sought to please her.

The season went by. The second planting was harvested and stored. My hunters went out to get as much meat as they could now—an excess to dry and store while the game was fat and plentiful. We raided all the small high valleys that could be closed to become our game traps. The record of Alanna's kills with her bow and her arrows was impressive. Several of my judges decided to try the new weapons, though my hunters still scorned any weapon but their bodies against most animals. I was pleased with my judges' flexibility.

My healers gathered a harvest of wild herbs to ease ailments of cold and old age that grew worse when the snows fell.

And I held on to Alanna. There was still much for me to teach her, and she was teaching me the language of her people. I knew I would have to deal with them someday. She was learning not only to fight, but to read the light speech that we used to signal each other through the mountains. We signaled warnings of raiders, of dangerous animals or good hunting, of places along the slopes that were not safe, and of other things. Light speech was difficult for Alanna to learn, especially at first, but her life would be safer when she understood it. As the snows came, and we were inside more, I spent much time teaching her. It was a pleasurable thing to do. Too much that had to do with her had become pleasurable. I realized that I was becoming too attached to her, and she to me. I promised myself I would let her go soon.

When she began to change, I thought it was because she sensed the nearness of our separation. I gave her no comfort because it was important to me to see how she handled her feelings alone. Her actions now would tell me whether or not I would ask her to come to me again after a few seasons. My cousin Kehyo had taught me that I should not ask a woman to come to me more than once if she could not control her feelings.

Alanna grew nervous. She watched me closely when she thought I did not see. She seemed to withdraw into herself and I could sense fear in her. Fear of parting?

I had already decided which apartment in the fighter section that I would give her, when she finally opened to me—told me what any other would have told me long before. And even on the night she told me, she was hesitant and evasive.

"Am I still ugly to you?" she asked. "Do you still see me as you did when we first came together?" It had been a long time since either of us mentioned such nonsense—back when she complained in jest that I had no lips. But she was serious now. Far more serious than she should have been over such a question. I refused to match her mood.

"How do you see me?" I asked, pulling her closer.

She lay silent by my side.

"Why are you afraid?" I asked.

"Because I think I've come to accept you more than you have me."

"We have only a liaison, Alanna."

"No."

"No?" I turned my head slightly to look at her. "What more can there be for us?"

"A marriage…if you can accept a marriage with me."

I sat up, controlling my annoyance. "Alanna, I have lost count of the number of my liaisons. Do you think I am without a wife, without children by choice?"

She said nothing, only watched me.

"How can I have a child with you when I have failed with so many Tehkohn women?"

"I don't know," she said. "Our two peoples must not be as different as I thought."

I looked down at her, suddenly confused. I could feel my body go iridescent. "What are you saying?"

"That I'm going to have a child, Diut. And it cannot be any harder for you to believe than it was for me."

For a moment, I could not speak. When the words did come, my own voice sounded strange to me. "A child? Alanna, are you…can you be certain?"

"Oh yes." She spoke with unmistakable bitterness.

"But…you are a young woman. It may be that you have made a mistake."

"Do you want it to be a mistake?"

"I mean only that you… Others of my mates have thought themselves pregnant with my child. They wanted it so badly that they…"

"That they imagined their wish had been granted, yes. There have been such women among the Missionaries too. But never once did I even imagine that it was possible for you and me to produce a child. I did not long for it because it seemed completely impossible. I only hoped that our time together could be long, and that we could come together again someday."

"I…had planned that we should, but…"

She sat up and faced me, the fear and uncertainty gone from her face. She appeared resigned. "You planned to give me an apartment of my own when I left you, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said, surprised.

"I'll go there then. I know our time together would have ended soon anyway. I'll stay there alone until our child is born. Then I'll

come back to you if you want me, or I'll stay there if you don't."

I could see both her certainty and her sadness, and almost against my will, I began to doubt. I knew I was hurting her. She was not the first woman I had hurt this way, but it was necessary. All my other mates had been wrong. I was afraid to believe her. Yet she was not the kind of woman who made stories within her mind and then acted as though the stories were true. Different as she was, she had shown herself to be worthy of my trust. Now, suddenly, I found myself striving to trust her. How many years had I thought myself to be flawed in the Hao way, unable to do what my yellowest artisan could do—unable to father a child.

"When did you first know of the child?" I asked quietly.

"Supposed child," she said bitterly. "Imaginary child."

"Alanna!"

She sighed. "Since shortly after the gathering at Kehyo's apartment. I waited to tell you because at first I didn't believe it myself. I waited to be sure."

At once my suspicions increased. Kehyo had insulted Alanna that night. Might Alanna not now be trying to best Kehyo by doing what Kehyo could not—having my child? I knew that Tahneh had told Alanna about Kehyo. I spoke my thought as gently as I could. When I had finished, even someone who had never known a member of Alanna's race could have read her anger.

"Show me where the new apartment is," she said. "I'll go there now. I can't listen to any more of this." She started to rise to her feet. I pulled her down again.

"You will listen. There is a decision for you to make. I will be guided by you."

Some of her anger gave way to curiosity. "What decision?"

"Whether we will have a gathering of our own. Whether we will announce to our friends—who will surely tell everyone—that you are going to have a child."

Her too-round eyes grew rounder. "So? You believe me?"

"I believe that you believe. And in the time we have been together, I have seen little foolishness in you."

She stared down at her own brown leg. "I thought I was prepared for anything you might say. 'Yes, I believe.' 'No, I don't believe.' 'Yes, I want the child.' 'No, such a mixed child would be a monster…'"

"Choose, Alanna."

"I want the gathering! Of course I want it. It's my right. And I want more. Need more." She looked into my face. "I would rather have you send me away than give me only your grudging acceptance. 'Oh, well, she's not entirely stupid. Maybe there's a chance that she's right.' Diut, let me be alone until you can be sure."

I lay on my back and looked up at her. There was a strange beauty to her when one did not try to fit her into the Kohn image—when one did not see her as a twisted Kohn. The day I realized that I was finding beauty in her was the day I knew it was time to be rid of her. People unable to produce children quickly learn the danger of becoming too attached to any mate.

"I have had other mates who thought they carried my child, Alanna."

"So you have said."

"One was Kehyo during our second liaison."

"Yes."

"Five others come to my mind quickly."

She winced as though from a blow, and looked away from me.

"Through them all, I have not permitted the gathering. I have never before permitted the gathering."

Now her eyes came back to me, filled with surprise. "Why not?"

"The first time, Kehyo's mother came to me and said, 'Wait. Be certain before you let her announce. With another, the people would laugh if there was a mistake. Then they would forget. With you, they might not laugh, but also, they might not forget. You are Hao, but very young. Let them have as little reason as possible to doubt you.' Kehyo's mother. My own mother was long dead. For that one piece of advice, I kept friendship with Kehyo's mother until she died. She was a wise woman. And, of course, Kehyo had no child until long after she had gone to Kahlahtkai."

"You kept her with you after her mother talked to you?"

"For two more seasons. I wanted a child by her very badly. And when she left me, she stayed alone for a time to be certain."

"And now…if I prove to be wrong, you will be shamed before the people."

I said nothing.

"We will wait until you are as certain as I am. Then we will have the gathering."

"I said I would be guided by you."

"So." I could feel her dissatisfaction.

"And instead, I have guided you." I pulled her down beside me and felt her move close. "I will go on guiding you then. Choose the friends you want to gather with you and tell them to come tomorrow. Tell them why if you like, or wait and I'll tell them myself when they are together."

She lifted herself on one elbow to look down at me. "Be careful what you say, Diut."

"So?"

"I'll do it. I'll even leave you to say the words."

"Well." I felt white come into my coloring. "At least you have learned to obey."

Natahk was gone. He had made a great show of gathering his fighters —all of them—and leaving the settlement. He had also made a show of shouting his anger at the Missionaries, blaming them for his weapons party's demise. He had promised ominously that he would deal with them as soon as he had dealt with the invading Tehkohn. Alanna had watched him carefully and decided that he was lying.

He would not be foolish enough to go running around the valley in search of enemies who might or might not still be there, and who might or might not find him first. No. Instead, he would wait, with his camouflaged army, for the Tehkohn to come to him—at the one place where both he and Alanna knew they would come sooner or later. The settlement. The Missionaries had suddenly become bait in a huge trap.

Natahk was probably ready for an army of Tehkohn—enough fighters either to herd the Missionaries away to the mountains, or to exterminate them. As it happened though, after three days and nights of waiting, his trap caught only one Tehkohn. Diut.

By then, the Missionaries had taken advantage of their privacy. For the first time since the founding of the settlement, they held a general meeting in the church with no Garkohn in attendance. At the meeting, they learned how Jules had managed to use the rivalry between the Tehkohn and the Garkohn to Missionary advantage. The Tehkohn, he told them, had agreed to divert the Garkohn with a battle while the Missionaries escaped. He lied to them in spite of his principles—gave them assurances that he did not feel himself, convinced them that in this one matter, at least, the Tehkohn could be trusted. He had to lie since he still did not dare to tell them that it was not the Tehkohn who had been stealing away Missionary captives, or that those captives were still alive. The captives had to be sacrificed if the colony was to survive, and Jules knew it. He had sworn Nathan James and Jacob Lorenz to silence, and had suppressed his private distress, his doubts. Alanna watched him with grim approval. He was chameleon enough when he had to be.

He ordered the people to keep as many of their belongings as they could already packed, and especially, to keep as much meklah seed and flour as they could packed. He told them to wait, and to stay in their homes if they heard fighting inside the settlement—Alanna had warned him of her suspicions. And the people were eager to obey. Natahk had made them more than willing to give up their homes and move to another valley. They were escaping to freedom again to fulfill their Mission without Garkohn interference. By the time Diut arrived, they were ready.

The Verricks were about to have dinner when he came. Jules had been helping to build extra handcarts for the journey since these and the Missionaries' own backs were the only means they would have of carrying their belongings. Jules came in at Neila's call. Diut came in with him—came rather carelessly, Alanna thought. She saw him at once, and deliberately turned away. Let him announce himself when he was ready.

He seemed to materialize out of the wall near the door. In shock, Neila dropped a bowl of peas and just managed to stifle a scream. Jules turned, gasped, then let his breath out slowly.

"Welcome, Tehkohn Hao," he said. And a moment later, "Will you eat with us?" He had remembered himself enough to speak Garkohn. Alanna smiled to herself and went to help Neila clean up the mess.

"I will eat," said Diut. "If there is time."

Jules frowned. "Time?"

"I let myself be seen as I crossed the wall. I think the Garkohn will be here soon."

Neila looked up. "You want them here?"

"Some of them." He sat down at the table, looked directly at Neila, who looked away. He yellowed briefly. "I want Natahk here. He will come. I showed myself where he would see me."

Alanna understood suddenly and stood up smiling. "And what will be happening outside that Natahk is not to see?"

He whitened. "Much. It has already begun to happen. By tomorrow, we will be victorious. Or dead."

Jules shuddered. "I had hoped that the fighting would take place far away from…" He stopped short, reddened. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

Diut sat and looked at him in silence.

Neila began almost casually to do what she never normally did—serving each of them herself. She worked quickly, seemed to be glad to have something to do with her hands, which had been trembling. They were steady now. Much of the food contained no meklah. Alanna, for her own safety, knew exactly what did. She paid close attention to what her mother served Diut. And, apparently, so did Neila herself. She served Alanna and Diut exactly the same things. Alanna relaxed, feeling relieved. Jules and Neila probably did not realize it, but Diut, by accepting food from them was accepting them I fully as allies, as family.

Alanna glanced at him, saw that instead of eating, he was watching her. She began to eat. She did not realize until he picked up his fork that he was watching her for more reason than to see whether or not the food was safe. He had never eaten with anything other than his fingers. But he was quick and unselfconscious. After a moment or

two of awkwardness, he held the fork with familiar ease. He even seemed to enjoy the food. Then he returned to business.

"There is nothing for you to do, Verrick. Just keep your people out of our way."

The straight thin line of Jules's mouth showed his resentment. But I perhaps he felt he had earned the comment. He spoke quietly. "My people will not come out into fighting unless I call them."

"So? It is well that you have already told them. Natahk might not allow you time to do it now."

"Are you…are you going to just wait for him here?" asked Neila.

Diut looked at her, and she managed to meet his gaze, look back for a moment. "For me," he said, "it would be better not to wait. I could keep ahead of him outside, kill many of his people before I was caught. But…there are things he could do to make me come out. Some of my judges have spied on the Garkohn. They say Natahk believes that I plan to seize your people away from him—that I have found some value in them for the Tehkohn. What better way to make me reveal myself then, than to destroy, bit by bit, that which he thinks I value?"

"But he really does value us," said Jules. "He would be destroying people he wants for himself."

"He wants some of you, certainly. Those with special skills, perhaps. But doubtless, many of you are expendable."

Jules sighed. "Yes, doubtless. But if you wait here, Natahk will kill you."

"He might try, but I think not. I have shamed him, and he will want revenge—but not my life. I am Hao, and valuable myself." He lowered his voice slightly. "Valuable and vulnerable. Alanna."

She looked at him.

"Go outside to where wood is stacked against the house. Feel on the ground between the house and the wood."

Without questioning, Alanna went. She moved casually but quickly, folding her arms against the night's chill, and watching with concealed alertness for any Garkohn who might already have entered. She saw none.

There was a small space at the bottom of the woodpile between the woodpile and the cabin. She was barely able to get her hand into it, but once she had, she felt a soft skin wrapping and the smoothly polished wood it covered. Her bow!

It was her most powerful Tehkohn-made bow. With it, she had made several large kills—mostly the shaggy ugly quadrupeds called leaf eaters. She fished out the quiver hastily, and carried it, the bow, and a few concealing sticks of wood back into the house. There, she was just in time to hear Jules ask Diut for the return of the

Missionaries' guns.

"Consider them part of the price of your freedom," said Diut. "I will not give them back."

The flat refusal seemed to take Jules by surprise. "But…why?"

"Because your people and mine might meet again someday—without a common enemy to unite us."

"And you think our weapons will give you an advantage over us?" demanded Jules. "We'll make new weapons!"

"We already have an advantage over you."

Jules frowned at him. "Then why…?"

"Because I expect you to catch up, compensate for the shortcomings of your bodies. If you live, you will learn. We too must learn. By the time your new land allows you the leisure you need to make weapons such as those you have lost, we too will know how to make such weapons." He looked over at Alanna just as she braced her bow against her foot and strung it. Jules and Neila turned to look at her first with curiosity, then with surprise. They had seen her come in with the wood, but apparently, they had not paid enough attention to her to see what else she carried.

Wordless, Alanna looked around for a place to hide the bow and quiver. She wanted it near the door where she could reach it quickly, but there was no piece of furniture near the door that was large enough to conceal it. She had to settle for the cabinet that contained Neila's few dishes. It was across the room from the door and the window, but it hid the bow and quiver completely.

"That is not a good place," observed Diut.

She shrugged. "I know."

He leaned back, pushed his plate away. "I put the bow in the wood days ago when I thought there would be fighting here. I hope you will not need it. But if you do, you must use it."

She looked at him steadily, not caring what Jules and Neila might read in the look. "I will not need it."

"I think you are right. I am not here to sacrifice myself. But this obligation is my own. If I fail to fulfill it, the others must be free to act in spite of my failure."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Jules.

"I am to kill him," said Alanna softly, "if he is clearly defeated and…used as a hostage to gain his people's surrender."

"Oh my God," whispered Neila.

"It is a precaution," said Alanna. "Only a precaution." She turned to Diut quickly, fending off thoughts she did not want to think. "Exactly what is happening outside now?"

"The Garkohn trappers are being caught in a trap," said Diut. "Jeh is coming from the west with one group of fighters. Kehyo has

circled wide around and is coming from the east. To the north, there are nonfighters secreted in trees, waiting to drop stones and paint."

"Nonfighters!"

"So that we seem more numerous than we are. But all will be quiet for some time now. Jeh's fighters and Kehyo's will kill silently tor as long as they can—making our numbers more even. The noise and light will not start until the Garkohn start it. And the Garkohn are bus> wondering what the Tehkohn Hao is doing inside the Mission settlement."

Alanna managed a smile. "With Natahk in here, perhaps they will panic when they find themselves surrounded."

"Some of them will surely panic. And they will panic others. We must keep Natahk here until that happens. When we hear shouting, the victory will be near for us. The more shouting, the better."

Alanna knew he was right. Kohn fighting, even in war, was normally silent. That was part of the reason why the guns of the Missionaries had been so effective in alarming the Tehkohn and herding them into a trap earlier. Now, the Garkohn would be the ones making the noise, and the ones panicked by it, as they tried to warn each other that they were infiltrated and under attack.

"Tehkohn Hao." Jules sat watching Diut with strange intensity.

Diut looked at him.

"I have a question that I don't want to ask. But I must ask it. Too much is wrong. What connection is there between you and my daughter?"

Diut glanced at Alanna.

She shrugged. "I tried once to tell him, but the time seemed wrong, the risk too great. Now…he must know."

Diut flashed white agreement and spoke to Jules. "Your daughter is the reason why you are still alive, Verrick. And she is the reason why your people will have their chance to escape this valley soon. She is my wife."

For a moment, Jules sat staring at Diut as though he had not heard. Finally he closed his eyes, shook his head slowly. "Like the Garkohn," he muttered. "No better than the Garkohn."

"No!" said Alanna sharply.

Jules looked at her.

"I'm not his prisoner, Jules, I'm his wife. I'm glad to be his…"

"*My God, Lanna*!" The words seemed to explode from Jules like a cry of pain. Alanna stopped uncertainly, looked at Neila. Abruptly, Neila got up and ran into her bedroom.

"Oh hell," muttered Alanna in English. "I'd hoped that now that they were committed, it wouldn't matter so much."

Diut switched to his own clear but strangely accented English. "In

one way, it will not matter. Everything is arranged. If they want to live, they will follow the arrangement."

The sudden switch to English caught Jules's attention. He spoke to Alanna. "You taught him English?"

"Yes. He wanted to learn."

"What else did you teach him?" The question was heavy with accusation.

"That we were rational people, Jules. That we could think and learn. That we were not animals!" She thought the irony of that might reach him even now, and it seemed to. He stared at Diut for a moment, then faced Alanna again.

"You have a child?" His voice had dropped to a whisper.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "I had a child. My daughter was killed in the raid."

Jules frowned, managed to look both confused and distressed. He seemed to find nothing to say. Neila crept back into the room, red-eyed, looking ill. She sat down, exchanged glances with Jules, then stared down at her half-eaten dinner.

Diut shattered the discomfort of the moment by announcing, "The Garkohn are over the wall. Several of them." He kept his voice low and appeared to be listening, though Alanna heard nothing.

Controlling her sudden fear, Alanna got up and went to Diut. Of the four of them, he seemed the one least likely to live through the night. What would she do if he died? What would the Missionaries do? And, if the need arose, how could she possibly…? But again, she pushed the thought away. She would do it if she had to. She would not fail him. He had not failed her. But she would not think about it until she had to.

He sat still, looking up at her. She laid her hand alongside his face, let it move downward to his throat so that as the caress ended, she clasped the throat in the "v" of her thumb and fingers. "You must live," she whispered in Tehkohn. "They are only slow hunters. Surely you can evade them."

He stood and held her for a moment. "I will live," he said quietly. "Preserve yourself. Remember all that I have taught you. I think Natahk will make you use it before the night is over."

He let her go, moved back toward the wall, seeming to dematerialize before he reached it. He was doing his best now, and he was invisible. He spoke once more, his voice seeming to come from nowhere.

"Deny that I am here. Use time."

Alanna took his dishes hurriedly and shut them in the cabinet with Neila's clean dishes. As she was sitting down again, they heard Natahk's voice.

"You will open the door, Verrick, or we will burn the house."

Jules got up quickly and opened the door.

Natahk stood just outside with a burning torch in his hand. He was surrounded by a tight half circle of other Garkohn. Too many Garkohn—twenty, perhaps twenty-five. "You will send out the Tehkohn Hao," Natahk said.

Jules stepped back as though in surprise, managed to seem bewildered. He stared at the torch. "What are you talking about? What's going on?"

It was a good act, Alanna thought. But Natahk was unimpressed. He gestured with his torch, then stepped back, well away from the door. Another Garkohn stepped up and threw a bucket full of something through the open doorway. Jules was drenched with it, and much of the room was spattered. The faint but distinctive odor of it told them all what it was. Lamp oil. It was pressed from a kind of nut that the Garkohn raised—that they had taught the Missionaries to raise. In the lamps, it burned with a bright steady yellow flame. It would give the dry wood of the cabin a fast start toward total destruction. Natahk spoke again.

"The Tehkohn Hao will come out, or you will all burn." He had already begun to come forward with the torch when Diut's unmistakable voice rang out.

"Garkohn!"

Natahk stopped, moved back from the door. His manner changed abruptly as he saw Diut seem to materialize out of the wall behind Neila. Natahk brightened his coloring pridefully toward white as he spoke. "You will come out."

"Put out the fire," said Diut.

"You do not give orders here, blue one. You will come out!"

Diut hesitated for as long as he dared. Alanna watched him, wondering whether he, like Jules, was to be drenched with lamp oil. Perhaps he wondered the same thing. He moved slowly, cautiously, toward the door, then suddenly sprang through the doorway in a leap that carried him well into the half circle. It was the kind of leap that might have carried him onto the back of an unwary animal. Now, it carried him into the midst of Garkohn who were not wary enough.

Startled, the Garkohn drew back, crouched, ready to defend. But Diut could have gone through them almost effortlessly if that had been his purpose. Instead, seeing no more oil to endanger him, Diut straightened, faced Natahk.

Natahk stared at him for several seconds, then turned back to the house. "And you!" He spoke to the three Verricks. "His friends. You will come out."

Jules, Neila, and Alanna trailed out slowly. Natahk set one guard

on Jules and Neila, and another on Alanna. “Listen to nothing she says,” he told Alanna’s guard. “If she does not obey, kill her.”

The hunter flashed white and looked at Alanna grimly.

For a moment, Alanna stared back at him. Then she looked away, thinking. He was an ordinary-looking member of his clan—a burly man, shorter than Alanna, but heavier, and no doubt, stronger. Alanna would have a chance to kill or disable him only if she was fast enough to get in the first blow, and accurate enough to make it count.

The Garkohn closed a complete circle around Diut, herding him out toward the common where a small fire burned. Alanna knew from having watched mock duels that it would still have been a simple matter for Diut to break out of the circle. He could have escaped into the shadows, hidden, and gone over the wall at his leisure. But he chose to stay and bait Natahk. He had promised Jeh and Kehyo a diversion. He was doing his part. If only they were doing theirs. Alanna found herself listening for shouts beyond the wall already even though she knew it was too soon.

Natahk joined the circle, faced Diut. “How interesting, Tehkohn Hao, to find *you* conferring with the Missionary leader. These people must be more important to you than I thought.”

“I have found them useful.”

Natahk yellowed. “They will wish they had been less useful.”

“That is your affair.”

“So? Has their usefulness ended so quickly? Why not use them once more. Call them out of their houses to help you. I have many fighters outside who would gladly kill them all!”

Diut said nothing.

Natahk looked at Jules. “You have betrayed your people, Missionary. And you know our way with traitors.” He looked at a huntress who stood just outside the circle. “Build up the fire.” Again he faced Diut. “I think we will make the fire for you too, Tehkohn Hao.”

Diut watched him warily.

“Have no fear though. We will not kill you. We will only revive the old custom—the custom that my people had almost forgotten. Since no Garkohn Hao has been born to us, we will make a Garkohn Hao.”

It was the grisly old custom that Diut had already almost fallen victim to among the desert people. A tribe that could neither buy a Hao nor produce one themselves stole one. They crippled him, kept him. The custom, Diut had told Alanna, was based on the belief that even the most bitter vengeful captive Hao was better than no Hao at all. Such a Hao was not a leader. He was a symbol of power, of unity, of good fortune. This reverence for the Hao, for the blue, was the

nearest thing the Kohn had to a religion. But it was a religion that Natahk denied. His people might feel more secure with a captive Hao, but Natahk would not. He was acting solely from vengeance.

Diut's coloring took on new intensity, became luminescent. He took a long slow look at the Garkohn surrounding him. "You have been without a Hao for too long," he told Natahk. "You have forgotten how difficult we are to hold."

"When we have burned your legs, holding you will be a simple matter," said Natahk.

"Do you think that I will submit to your fire?" said Diut. "Come. Attack! You have forgotten what the blue means. I will refresh your memory!"

The Garkohn of the circle could not quite hide their reaction. There was a slight but general yellowing among them. The Hao were creatures of legendary fighting prowess. Diut was exploiting the fact that the Garkohn were not sure how much was only legend. Or most of them were not.

"You hold him captive in your midst for the second time and you are still afraid," shouted Natahk. "You still think he is something other than a large Kohn. His size makes him a little stronger than one of you, but not stronger than all of you together. He is no more than a man!" He looked toward the space on the common where the huntress and a hunter who had helped her carry wood from alongside one of the cabins were building up the fire. It was growing promisingly.

"Put him on the ground," Natahk told his hunters.

The habit of obedience was strong enough to overcome the fear of at least four of them. These four surged toward Diut. And Diut waited for them.

He let the first of them reach him, then he jabbed sharply into the man's throat. Blocking, turning, he drove a fist into the solar plexus of a huntress, literally lifting her off the ground for a moment.

He moved almost too quickly for the eye to follow, striking, turning, kicking, using his longer reach, his greater strength and speed, to overwhelm his attackers.

In seconds, all four were dead or dying. A fifth who had attacked from directly behind Diut now dragged himself away beyond the Tehkohn Hao's reach, his right leg broken at the knee by a hard-driven backward kick.

Four dead, one injured before the others could even think. What was left of the circle threatened to dissolve.

"Hokah!" Natahk called out.

The huntress at the fire looked at him.

"Go out and get more fighters."

And Diut countered, "Stop, Hokah!"

The huntress paused uncertainly.

"Why sacrifice more of your people to the ambitions of a bad leader?" Diut looked around the circle. "It is Natahk who wants me—so that he can say he has bested a Hao. Let him best me then." He faced Natahk squarely.

"I challenge, First Hunter."

"You are my prisoner," said Natahk. "You have no right to challenge. Go, Hokah"

The huntress went.

"So?" said Diut. "Who imprisons me?" He let his gaze rest on individual members of the circle. "Who dies next?"

Natahk called to the hunter still at the fire. "Ihiateh, bring torches."

The hunter seized two burning brands and passed them to a hunter and huntress within the circle. Instantly, Diut attacked.

He broke through the circle now, lifted the first Garkohn who tried to stop him, and threw the man at the two who were approaching with torches.

The two hunters guarding the Verricks looked anxiously at the deteriorating situation. They seemed fearful of disobeying Natahk and leaving their prisoners, but they could see that their help was needed.

Abruptly, the hunter guarding Jules and Neila hurled himself into the fighting, helping those who had managed to seize more torches and drive Diut back against the wall of a storehouse. Alanna's guard was more conscientious. He decided to kill her before he joined in.

Without warning, he slashed at her with a stubby hand. Alanna dodged backward swiftly, but seemed to stumble in bumbling Missionary awkwardness. Angry at having missed once, the hunter lunged toward her—directly into the hard jab that she had aimed at his throat. His fur cushioned the blow somewhat, and forced her to strike without the certainty she would have felt in striking a person whose throat she could see. But the hunter's own momentum helped her—gave her blow more force. He fell, writhing, making gurgling sounds through his ruined larynx.

At that moment, there was a distant shout, then much shouting from beyond the wall. Garkohn alerting each other that Tehkohn had infiltrated their ranks.

The Garkohn inside, who had been on the verge of overwhelming Diut by fire and sheer weight of numbers, froze where they were. Diut, who had not been startled by the sounds, struck down one of them and ran for the darkness behind the Missionaries' houses.

A pair of Garkohn hurried to open the gates, but before Natahk and what was left of his party could go out, several more Garkohn surged in, panicked, babbling that the Tehkohn had found allies—that

at least two tribes attacked them.

Alanna saw Natahk kill one of his own men in rage, heard him order them back out to fight. “Fools! You’re the only allies that the Tehkohn need! You’ve let them trick you somehow! You’re like children and nonfighters. Go back!”

His commands and threats drove them back, but Alanna wondered if some of the yellow they showed was more in anger at him than in fear of the Tehkohn. Natahk followed his people out, Diut forgotten, and plunged into the battle.

Alanna and Jules moved at the same time to close the gates. The Garkohn could get in again, over the wall, but it would be harder, take longer.

The only Garkohn left in the settlement were the dead, and the one injured man whose leg Diut had broken. He sat alone on the common, leaning against a tree, his body yellow with fear and pain. He watched them, probably waiting for them to kill him.

CHAPTER TEN

Alanna

The gathering was small. I invited Jeh and Cheah, of course. And I would have invited Gehnahteh and Choh. But Diut said flatly, “This is a time for blue, not yellow. There are other times for nonfighters.”

“But wouldn’t your blue balance their yellow?” I asked foolishly. I had been with the Tehkohn long enough to know better than to ask such a question.

“What balance?” said Diut with annoyance. “This is a time for as much blue as possible to bring luck to the child, and to you. It is the custom. Do you think Gehnahteh and Choh would be grateful to you for inviting them in violation of tradition?”

I sighed and invited Tahneh and Ehreh—their age spots did not seem to count against their blue. And Diut insisted on inviting Kehyo and Kahlahtkai—though not for their blue.

“I want Kehyo’s foolishness to end completely,” he said. “This gathering will tell her what, somehow, my words have never quite communicated to her.” Again there was no arguing with him, but this time I smiled. If nothing else, I approved of the message he was trying to give Kehyo.

I was beginning to see him as my husband, to realize as though for the first time, that I had no real choice but to accept his superstitions and his relatives as I accepted him. It was different, now that I had to view my acceptance as a permanent thing. This was the way I would live. The Tehkohn were the people whose lives I would share. The Missionaries would become only a memory. I could never think of returning to them with a “half-human” child. Nor could I think of abandoning such a child, who would surely be different and as much alone in its strangeness as I was.

I had thought about it and thought about it and thought about it

before I told Diut, and I had been afraid. For the first time in my life, I longed to be the wife of some ordinary Bible-quoting Missionary man. Someone whose eyes really were as round as Diut said mine were. Someone furless and human-looking. I was terrified.

Then came anger—at Diut, at the child, at my own body… How could such a thing happen? Most Missionaries had never even considered the possibility. Jules and Neila had—with disgust. They had first seen the overt sexuality of the Garkohn as confirmation that the Garkohn were animals. Then the Garkohn came to understand how easily the Missionaries were shocked and offended. Obligingly, the Garkohn conformed to Missionary custom when they were in the Mission colony. But still, Neila was concerned with their refusal to wear clothing.

"Jules, I've seen some of our boys looking at their women," she had said.

And Jules had made a sound of disgust. "Just about the same ones we would have seen looking at goats and female guard dogs back on Earth," he had said.

"But what if they…?"

"They won't. At least not without a lot of co-operation from those bull women. And if a Garkohn woman does co-operate, what's she got to complain about? I might let the community loose on the first boy who gets caught at it though. It's something to put a stop to early."

"You could warn them. Get them together and warn them all."

"And put the idea into the heads of those who haven't thought of it yet? No. Unless Garkohn men begin looking at our women, I'm going to keep quiet."

"Garkohn men… Image of God!" muttered Neila with unmistakable revulsion. "Thank God there's no possibility of mixed children, no matter what happens."

She was so wrong, my foster mother. But I hadn't known how right I had considered her to be until I realized I was carrying Diut's child. I felt betrayed.

And no doubt, I communicated my feelings to Diut without saying a word. He began to look at me with doubt and concern. But somehow, I couldn't bring myself to tell him what was wrong. Not until I resolved my own conflicts. I was too solitary a person to ask for help. So by the time I spoke to him, I had already accepted the idea that I was to be the mother of his child whether either of us liked it or not—and that he might not like it very much.

He surprised me though. He got over his shock and disbelief much more quickly than I had expected. And he seemed to feel no resentment when he realized that he was to be tied to an alien or that his child would probably lack some of the physical advantages his

people prized. He was content, even proud, merely to have fathered a child. At last.

I began to relax. On the day of the gathering, I went around to each of the three couples and asked them to come that night and share our evening meal. I said no more than that. By that night, we were, all except Ehreh, eating together, sitting on huge jehruk skins before the fire. Tahneh said Ehreh's leg hurt him in a place where he had broken it years before. "He is at home waiting for me to come and pity him," she finished callously. "Are there more ohkah cakes, Alanna?"

Diut whitened and spoke to her as I got the cakes. "He will die waiting for your pity."

"He will die no matter what I do," said Tahneh. She would be half destroyed if the old judge died.

Diut flickered iridescent. "I listen to you, Tahneh, and I wonder if it is such a good thing to be bound to only one woman. What will I do if Alanna becomes like you when she and I are old?"

The room went utterly silent. The other two couples had been talking quietly among themselves, but they had heard Diut's too-casual question just as he had intended them to hear. Suddenly, they were realizing that this whole gathering might be less casual than they had assumed.

Jeh turned to face Diut. "What are you saying?" he demanded. "What is this you're telling us?"

"Alanna is going to have a child."

They mobbed him. As though he were plain green, they congratulated him and jostled him and shouted at him for the manner of his announcement and joked with him and ignored me entirely. The child was growing inside my body, and yet it was as though I did not exist.

Then Tahneh detached herself from the group around Diut and came over to me.

"So you are one of us now." She spoke very quietly, but the others fell silent and turned to look at me.

"For certain now," I said.

"And what do you feel?"

I started to answer and found myself unable to speak for a moment—as though the idea of what was happening was still new to me. Tahneh hugged me in arms startlingly strong in spite of her age and I hugged her back, sharing my joy with her.

The others came one by one to congratulate me, Cheah also reaching up to lay a hand of friendship alongside my face. "We are sisters now," she said, "both breaking tradition and making marriages where we should not."

And Kehyo, dazed, subdued. "Now I know why I am here," she

said. “I had wondered why you asked me. It was to tell me that you had won in spite of… That you had won.”

“It was to tell you that you and I are kinswomen,” I said.

“Kinswomen…? So.”

“And the past is the past.”

She stared down at me from her greater height. “I hear, Alanna.” She gave a brief dim show of white. “I wish you well—you and your child.”

Truce. Which was all I had hoped for really.

Diut drew me over to sit with him and we finished eating. When the food was gone and our guests were gone, we still sat together, not talking, enjoying the closeness that had grown between us. The fire burned down slowly.

When the Garkohn had gone, Missionaries began coming out of their houses, proving that they had not slept through everything, though they had followed orders and kept out of it. Jules called them to him.

“Our escape will be sometime tonight or tomorrow,” he told them when they gathered around. “Ready yourselves. Remember to pack as much meklah as possible in seed arid flour form. Meklah first, then clothing, food, tools, whatever. And remember that you’re going to be traveling for days through mountainous terrain carrying or pulling whatever you pack. So think. Essentials only. Now not everyone is awake. Check your neighbors. Make sure the word is passed. Go.”

They turned and headed back to their houses, some hesitantly, some hurrying. Jules singled out Nathan James, Jacob Lorenz, and John Williamson, and called them to him as the others left. He spoke quietly to them.

“Are you three packed?”

They nodded.

“Good. I don’t want to take the chance of anyone being missed. I Go through the settlement and…” He broke off, seeing that their I attention had shifted to something behind him. Diut had come out of the shadows and seemed to materialize beside Alanna.

She looked at him anxiously. He appeared battered and singed. j Also, she had noticed that he had a slight limp.

“I am well,” he told her in quiet Tehkohn. “And you did well. I saw your kill.” Then he spoke in English to Jules. “Some Garkohn may be driven back here before the fighting is ended. If that happens, my people will follow. It is still important for your people to stay inside until I or one of my judges says it is safe.”

Jules nodded, spoke to his three men. “You heard him. Tell the people that too as you spread the word. Make sure everyone is alerted.”

Nathan James hung back as the others left. Alanna had seen him looking from her to Diut and frowning at Diut's use of English. She knew what was coming. "Jules, what's going on? What's between Alanna and that…the Tehkohn Hao?" Only Nathan and Jacob knew that it was possible for there to be anything between them. Only they knew about the Garkohn crossbreeding. And only Nathan would concern himself with such a thing in the middle of a war.

Jules's expression became stony. "For once, Nathan, do as you're told without asking questions."

"But…"

"Move!"

Startled, Nathan moved.

Diut left Alanna's side and limped over to the fallen Garkohn. Alanna knew what was about to happen, but Jules and Neila did not. She glanced at them uncertainly.

"What's he doing?" Neila asked Jules.

Jules said nothing.

The Garkohn forced his coloring to its normal dark green, overcoming both fear and pain. He looked at the leg that Diut was favoring and even managed to whiten a little. "We did hurt you then, Tehkohn Hao."

"So," Diut admitted.

"For hunters fighting against a Hao, even that is no small thing." The man wrenched himself around to face Diut directly. "Let me die as a fighter."

In a swift flow of movement, Diut dropped to one knee, seized the hunter by the fur of his head, jerked the head down, and broke the man's neck with a single blow. The Garkohn's hands were just reaching Diut's arm as the blow landed. He had died as he wished to die-as a fighter was supposed to die. It was Kohn custom that a fighter who had fought well and lost had his neck broken—even if he had actually been killed in some other way. Other Kohn read contempt or respect in the way an enemy's body was left.

"So," Diut repeated, this time in agreement with the dead Garkohn's request.

Alanna looked at her parents, saw that they were watching grim-faced. "There'll be a lot more of that if the fighting spills into the settlement," she warned softly. "The Tehkohn don't carry off injured enemies and they won't leave them here alive to heal and fight again."

Neila shook her head in weary disgust. "Savages," she muttered.

Alanna shrugged.

"Are you really one of them, Lanna? Can you really accept them as your people even now that you've gotten used to the way he…the way they look?"

"Yes," said Alanna.

"I don't understand." She shook her head again. "After all we tried to teach you. And you're bright. You learned so much. You accepted God and the Mission…"

"I accepted you and Jules. You used to know that."

"But…"

"You saved my life. I was grateful, and in time, I came to love you. But you know I was never a true Missionary."

"What else can you be? You're here on an alien world among creatures of another species…"

"I'm a wild human," said Alanna quietly. "That's what I've always been." She glanced at Jules. "I haven't lost myself. Not to anyone." And again to Neila. "In time, I'll also be a Tehkohn judge. I want to be. And I'm Diut's wife and your daughter. If…you can still accept me as your daughter."

Neila gazed downward, her arms folded tightly across her chest. "Wild human," she murmured. "I think that in spite of all your time with us, we never really knew what that meant."

Alanna did not know whether Neila was rejecting her or accepting her in spite of her differences—her sins. She stepped closer, her expression questioning. Then, somehow, she had gone as far as she could in asking the woman's acceptance. She stood still waiting.

-Neila looked up at her, held her gaze for a long moment, then abruptly caught her in a hard silent hug that reminded Alanna oddly of Tahneh, the female Tehkohn Hao. "You are what you are," Neila said softly. "I don't understand, but…" She shrugged, looked at Alanna sadly for a moment, then turned to go into the house.

And Jules?

Alanna looked at him. He looked at her, then at Diut, who stood a few feet away waiting. Finally, Jules turned his back on them both and followed Neila into the house. Without saying a word, he had managed to reject both of them, or at least, to reject their union. He probably understood what Alanna had said and what she had done better than Neila did, but understanding did not equal acceptance. Alanna had broken what was to him a very basic, very old taboo. A taboo that was part of the foundation of his life.

Diut came to her, spoke quietly. "I am going outside."

Her concern with her parents shifted instantly to him. Already, the Garkohn had cornered him, come near killing him. Now he was going to give them another chance. But she made no protest. She knew that he was going out after Natahk. She touched his throat lightly and he turned and loped off into the shadows between the houses. She noticed that his leg seemed to bother him less now. That was good since he would have to camouflage himself and go over the

wall. Opening the gate and walking out would make him the target of any number of possibly vengeful Garkohn.

She went back to the house to sit and wait. The helplessness she felt was galling. It was made worse by the almost tangible weight of resentment that Jules seemed to spread over the house. Finally, he went out to help check on the people's preparations. It pained Alanna that she felt relief at his going.

She had always felt closer to him than to Neila—felt more able to talk with him, more able to be honest with him. She wondered what would have happened had she told him sooner, before the Tehkohn escape. She shook her head thinking about it.

"Was there…a ceremony of some kind?" Neila asked timidly.

Alanna jumped, startled out of her thoughts, then realized what Neila had asked.

"You mean a marriage ceremony?"

Neila nodded.

"No. But there was a ceremony for Tien when she was born. It amounts to the same thing."

"How did she look? I mean…was she…"

"She was much like him. He thought she might even be Hao. You can't tell until their bodies mature a little and their coloring darkens."

"What would you have done…what would he have done if the baby had been like you?"

Alanna smiled a little remembering. "We talked about that. He said if the child was like me, he would help me teach it to hunt with a bow."

Neila looked surprised. "He must be more tolerant than he seems. Did you want a liaison with him?"

"No." Her memory went back even farther, and suddenly she wanted to tell the story, the truth, to this woman who had become her mother. She had never told it before, even to other Tehkohn. Doubtless, they knew parts of it, but only the public parts. The fact of the liaison, the marriage. Telling the rest now would pass the dragging time. She spoke easily, feeling amusement where once she had felt terror. Neila was horrified.

"Does he still beat you?" she asked.

"No more. Now we talk."

"But still… Lanna, what he did to you is at least as bad as what the Garkohn do to their captives. You stayed with him while you were in the mountains because you had to, but surely now…"

"Now he's my husband."

"Not by any law we recognize."

"I recognize it."

"But why? I still can't understand… Is it so that he'll help us

against the Garkohn?"

"It could be," said Alanna. "That would be a good reason. But no, it's because of what I said a few minutes ago. I'm not a Missionary. I don't think I ever could be. But I can be Tehkohn—in spite of the physical differences. It's almost easy." She thought for a moment of the Garkohn, of the abducted Missionaries. "I'm not like Tate. Not like the others who were taken with her. Natahk may have made Garkohn of them, but not very good Garkohn. Because first, he would have had to destroy them as Missionaries."

"Why did Diut beat you if not to destroy you as a Missionary—break you down?"

"We fought for a lot of reasons. Most often because he wasn't used to hearing people say 'no' to him." Alanna shrugged. "Neither was I. And the first time, because when I got a good look at him and realized that he wanted me, I panicked."

Neila shuddered. "I would have panicked myself. I think he would have had to kill me."

"I didn't want to die."

Neila looked at her strangely.

"I didn't have any Missionary inhibitions about pairing with a Kohn man," she said. "After I got used to the way Diut looked, I was glad the match had been made." She laughed suddenly. "We were at least equally strange-looking to each other."

"Not strange enough. How can you laugh about it?"

"It's past. He said I looked deformed, wrong. That's why he was curious about me. It didn't seem possible to him that I was really a woman."

Neila made a sound of disgust. "And what happens when the sick novelty of having a deformed woman wears off? Will he start to beat you again? Will he throw you out? Or will he just kill you to be certain he's rid of you? Since he kills so easily."

"That novelty wore off as quickly for him as it did for me. I think you know that." Alanna paused. "You saw him put his life in my hands tonight."

"…yes."

"And he put himself in danger for all three of us. It really would have been easier for him to lead the Garkohn on a chase around the settlement—if he hadn't been afraid of what they'd do to us before they got the chase started. *Us*, not some anonymous unskilled Missionaries."

Neila said nothing.

"Do you know the meaning of the hand-to-throat gesture?"

"It's a caress." Neila sounded harassed. "It's one of the things they do instead of kissing."

"It's that, yes. But it began as an expression of trust. You don't let anyone that close to your neck unless you trust him. The words that went with the gesture were, 'I hold your life, and do not take it.'"

Neila sighed, shook her head. "All right, Lanna. You've made your decision. I only hope your trust isn't misplaced."

Suddenly there was noise outside. Shouting, the sound of the gate being opened. Jules slipped silently into the house.

"Garkohn," he said. "Two of them came over the wall blood-red with paint, and opened the gate for the others. Image of God, if we only had our guns!"

"Is everyone under cover?" asked Neila.

"Yes. Now if only the Tehkohn can get in here before we're dragged out again."

Alanna got up and blew out the room's single lamp. Then she went to the small front window and looked out. The Garkohn were gathering on the common, building up the dying fire, and apparently quarreling among themselves. Most were smeared with red paint. Some were injured. Natahk was nowhere in sight—nor was Diut.

The argument on the common seemed to intensify and Alanna saw a huntress strike a hunter down. It was then that Alanna recognized the huntress as Gehl. Alanna watched her more alertly now. What was it she wanted her fighters to do?

Gehl pointed out a storehouse that Alanna knew was full of Missionary supplies, and two Garkohn went into it. When they came out, one was carrying a full bucket. Clearly, Gehl meant to take up where Natahk had left off. Alanna did not even wait to be certain which house was to be the huntress' target. She knew. She went for her bow.

She found it quickly in the dark, took it and the quiver to the door. She opened the door and nocked an arrow.

Gehl had taken the bucket herself and was coming toward the house with it. Aiming quickly, carefully, Alanna put her first arrow through the huntress' neck. It was a foolish target, Alanna knew—a small target obscured by the huntress' mane. But Alanna took grim pride in having made the shot.

As the huntress fell, Alanna took another arrow, aimed, and shot the Garkohn who had been bringing Gehl's torch. By then, the rest of the Garkohn had had time to hide themselves. But they were pinned down. They had hidden in the Missionary way of simply crouching behind a tree or building. They were all too well covered with red paint to camouflage themselves.

Alanna shut the door and barred it. She went to the window and lifted out the plastic pane—plastic from the ship. It would be more difficult to shoot accurately through the small window, but it would

be safer than continuing to shoot from the door. It would lessen the possibility of an unpainted Garkohn catching her unaware and forcing his way in.

Even as Alanna thought of this, she saw a Garkohn run from the storehouse. She followed the bobbing patch of red for a second, then released a third arrow. The Garkohn flared yellow, fell, then managed to drag himself behind a tree. Alanna could have hit him a second time, but she chose not to. She had only five arrows left. Deliberately, she set two aside for Diut—just in case.

Abruptly, Alanna realized that the storehouse that the Garkohn had run from was afire. She could just see the flickering yellow and orange glow in the high small windows. As she was calling Jules and Neila to see, some of the lamp oil stored there exploded.

The sound was like muffled thunder. There were other explosions. The flames were clearly visible now as they began to eat through the walls. Then some movement near the gate caught Alanna's attention. Tehkohn were pouring into the settlement.

Alanna noticed that some of them too were smeared with red paint. She put her bow down, fearing that she might accidentally shoot an ally. If only the Tehkohn were quick. How long would it take sparks and flying embers to ignite the dry wood of the houses near the storehouse.

There was fighting almost immediately. The painted Garkohn could conceal themselves from Alanna behind trees and houses, but they could not hide from Tehkohn who were moving around actively seeking them. Also, the fire now lit the common brightly, aiding the Tehkohn. Alanna saw several Garkohn try to go over the wall, scaling the rough sheer face like insects until quicker Tehkohn judges pulled them back. And there were Tehkohn on guard at the gate.

Suddenly Neila screamed. When Alanna turned to see what was wrong, she found herself looking through the door of her own bedroom into a wall of flame.

She could hear it now, would have heard it much sooner crackling along with the burning storehouse, had she not been so intent on the battle outside.

Jules moved at once to the pile of supplies in the corner beside the fireplace. Understanding, Alanna and Neila moved to help him. These were essentials. Everything else was to be abandoned anyway.

Bundles were carried out under the eyes of the Tehkohn gate guards, and placed near the wall. The Garkohn all seemed too busy to take any notice of what the three Missionaries were doing—yet at least one Garkohn had found time to set fire to the house. That thought made Alanna watchful as she set her load down. Jules and Neila hurried back for the rest. Alanna was about to follow them when

her watchfulness paid off. She saw the partially camouflaged Natahk just before he reached her. His camouflage was good, but he had paint on one shoulder. What Alanna saw first was little more than a flash of red coming at her out of the shadows.

Instantly, she launched herself to one side, barely avoiding the grasping hands. Even as she moved, she remembered his speed. He was so much faster than he should have been as a hunter—possibly faster than she was. He was, after all, the best of the Garkohn hunters.

She fell, rolled, kicked savagely, seeing that he was almost upon her. He had taken almost no time at all to recover from his futile lunge. She could not let him get his hands on her. With his skill and strength, he could kill her without exerting himself.

She leaped to her feet as he regained his balance after her kick. But again his recovery was too swift. He managed to seize her arm.

Instantly, she folded to him, unexpectedly yielding. She raked the short hard nails of her free hand across his eyes.

He flared yellow, made a choked sound of pain, threw her to the ground with stunning force.

For a moment, the scene was frozen. Natahk, his body glowing yellow with pain, stood silent, hands to face; and Alanna only half conscious on the ground. Alanna was dimly aware of people gathering. Someone took hold of her shoulders to drag her away from Natahk. At that instant, Natahk came to life. He swept up Alanna's rescuer much as Diut had lifted a Garkohn earlier, and threw him at the surrounding Tehkohn.

Clearly, he could still see. Alanna tried to focus on him. Yes, he could still see. Out of one eye.

He dragged her to her feet by her hair and one arm. The arm he twisted agonizingly behind her. The hair he looped around his hand and used to pull her head back so far that she almost forgot the pain of her arm. Apparently, this stopped the advancing Tehkohn.

"I thought so," said Natahk. "Now who will keep me from the gate? Who will cause me to kill the wife of the Tehkohn Hao?"

Pain made it difficult for her to think. The extreme angle of her head made speech almost impossible. She felt herself dragged toward the gate, heard Natahk's command.

"Open it! And if there are Tehkohn outside, clear me a path through them."

She heard someone open the gates, but for what seemed a long time, Natahk did not move with her. She felt herself losing consciousness. Her eyes refused to focus and her head throbbed. She thought she heard Missionary voices—Jules and Neila calling. Others shouting. Then she heard another voice, quite close. Diut.

"If you kill her, I'll make your Garkohn tortures seem pleasant to

you."

"Let me pass," said Natahk. "And she need not die."

"I would kill her myself before I would leave her to you."

Impasse.

Alanna fought to remain conscious, strained to hear past the roaring in her ears.

"Release her," said Diut. "And my people will not harm you."

"And you?"

"We fight. Defeat me, and you go free. I command it now. If you kill me, my people are to let you go."

"Fight a Hao!"

"Did you not tell your people that I was no more than a man?"

"A man with two eyes!"

"And one arm."

The words shocked Alanna to full consciousness. His arm? If only she could lower her head to see him.

"Broken," commented Natahk. "But it will heal—if you live. It is no payment for an eye. I must see that you are better paid!"

Without warning, Alanna felt herself literally thrown forward. She stumbled a few steps blindly, somehow managing to keep her feet until someone caught her. She knew it was Diut when he passed her quickly to someone else.

"You shame my teaching," she heard him mutter. "How could you have missed his other eye?"

She wondered herself. She willed her legs to support her and stood away from whoever held her. Not until then did she realize that it was Jules. The moment he saw that she was able to stand alone, he released her.

She looked around for Diut and saw him in the midst of a wide ring of Tehkohn. Just as she focused on him, he blocked a blow with his left arm, then dodged sharply backward away from a quick second blow that he could not block. His right arm, Natahk's right eye. The two circled each other warily. They seemed to spar as though in a friendly mock duel. Diut was limping again, worse this time, and he looked as though handfuls of his fur had been torn out here and there. Natahk looked unhurt except for the eye. But the eye was important. Aside from the distracting pain, the agony, that it had to be giving, it made him nervous and overcautious. And it made him highly protective of the other eye. He could not take proper advantage of Diut's disability while he was protecting his eye from Diut's potentially deadly jabs.

Diut kicked sharply, using his feet where he could not use his arm. They danced, every now and then striking a blow that would have killed anyone else. It looked deceptively simple. Once Natahk

went down, but was on his feet again before the clearly weary Diut could use the advantage.

Then Diut fell, knocked down by £ blow he could neither dodge nor block. Natahk tried to kick him in the face or throat, but Diut caught his foot one-handed, twisted it, threw him off balance. Natahk fell, got up limping as Diut rose.

Favoring Natahk's blind side, Diut strove to end the fighting. He drove the Garkohn back, scattering a group of onlookers.

Abruptly, Natahk stopped running, launched himself at Diut as though at an animal. Natahk's size alone would have made such a move enough to unnerve a lesser opponent. The two fell together, Natahk shifting his weight deliberately so that Diut could not help falling on his injured arm.

For the first time, Alanna heard Diut scream in pain. For a moment he lay still, Natahk atop him. Natahk seized him by the fur of his head, pulled the head back to expose the throat. Unexpectedly, Diut rolled, made a sound like an animal snarl as he unseated Natahk. He struck the Garkohn a heavy blow to the side of the head—the blind side. The blow was hard enough to stun anyone else, but it only slowed Natahk down for a moment. The moment was enough.

Diut stood up. Natahk had just managed to rise to his knees. He looked up at Diut just as Diut drove a hoof-hard foot into his throat. Natahk flared luminescent yellow, collapsed, and slowly faded to the mottled death yellow. The last fighting of the battle was over.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alanna

My child, a thickly furred, deep green little girl was an instant celebrity. Curious Tehkohn came visiting as soon as Diut would let them, came looking to see how blue the child was and how different. Her dark coloring pleased them, but they said it was shaded strangely. They said the shape of her eyes was strange. They thought her hands and feet were wrong somehow. Then they looked at my hands and feet and saw where the "wrongness" would probably lead. They visited often, and I grew weary of them, weary of their observations. Diut enjoyed their attention but I didn't.

Sometimes I took refuge with Tahneh, taking the child with me—Tien, Diut had named her. I wanted to keep her with me as much as I could before I had to give her up to her nonfighter second-parents. She would become their charge completely for the twenty-five-day separation period that would begin as soon as she had her welcoming ceremony. After the twenty-five days, I could see her when I wanted to, when I had time, but until she was older and less vulnerable, her home would be in the protected nonfighter section of the dwelling. That was something I tried not to think about. Diut did not mention it as the days passed, but finally, Tahneh reminded me.

I had escaped my "guests," and gone to her apartment where I could sit comfortably against a wall and nurse Tien in peace.

"You are a fighting woman," said Tahneh quietly. "You must stop that soon." She meant the nursing. Female fighters had to be ready to fight again as soon after giving birth as possible. Not for the first time, I resented the restrictions of my high status. I wanted to care for my child myself.

Tahneh laid a hand on my arm. "If I had ever borne a child, I would want very much to care for it myself in my own way. I don't

envy you the separation, but it must come."

"I know."

"He has been holding off the ceremony so that you could have more time with the child."

I looked at her, startled. "That I didn't know."

The old woman whitened. "I thought not. It is a kind of gift that he's giving you. I am not certain that it is kind. The longer you wait, the harder the separation will be."

"Are you saying I should tell him that I'm ready?"

Tahneh flared yellow. "Not unless you are. I wanted only to tell you what I thought you might not realize."

I looked down into Tien's face. "I wish I was still working as an artisan."

"If you were, you would not have had his child."

"So. Things never fit together as they should. I will tell him."

"You are certain that you trust Gehnahteh and Choh? You will be at ease leaving the child with them?"

"I trust them. We had our differences when I was with them, but they were kind. Certainly kinder than they had to be to a foreigner."

"I spoke with them." Tahneh's body went white for several seconds. "They were overwhelmed. It was the old story proven true."

"Old story?"

She brightened more and settled back to tell it as I had known she would. "In the time of the empire a woman, a judge, was charged by her husband with consorting with a nonfighter, an artisan. She insisted that she was innocent, but her husband had more blue and he was very jealous. The artisan, a member of his trade family, was unusually large and possessed some beauty. The husband beat a false confession out of him, then killed him. The council of judges caused the wife to be painted red all over, and given to an artisan family so that she could serve them and get her fill of such people. The artisans treated her kindly—more kindly than they were commanded to treat her. In time, the woman realized that she was pregnant. Everyone assumed that she carried the artisan's child and plans were made to kill it when it was born. No one but the two artisans showed her any color but yellow. Her husband renounced her completely and began a liaison with another woman. Then the woman gave birth to a child too blue for anyone to dare to kill. And as the child grew, it became, clearly, a young Hao. The woman was vindicated beyond any doubt and she showed yellow to her husband and found a new man. Her child, she gave to the two artisans who had been kind. That child grew to be one of our greatest leaders."

I smiled. "This might not be quite like the story then. I doubt that Tien is Hao."

“She may be. But even if she is not, her coloring will place her high—she was born so dark! And she is Diut’s daughter. There will be honor for Gehnahteh and Choh. And much honor for you, Alanna. The people pester you now, but also, they honor you. If I had borne a child, they would behave this way. Both you and Tien are of interest to everyone—more than interest. Tien might someday be their leader.”

The ceremony was held in a huge gathering room beneath the living quarters. The only people absent were those unlucky enough to be on watch in the mountains outside. Tahneh presided, standing tall and regal. The people fanned out in a wide half circle around her, fighter and nonfighter together, ignoring clan differences for once since no specific clan was welcoming this first child. Everyone welcomed Diut’s child.

I was wearing my usual pants and short tunic made from soft leather and a wide blue-green fur cloak. But all my clothing was new, made for me since Tien’s birth. Diut had given it to me just as I was about to dress for the ceremony. He still gave gifts, but he had been very subdued about giving these. The separation was not going to be easy for him either.

In my new clothing, I knelt beside Diut on a small pallet of fur on the stone floor. Tien slept peacefully in my arms. To my right on a similar pallet knelt Gehnahteh and Choh. Behind them were all the people. Before them stood Tahneh.

“We meet to welcome a first child,” said Tahneh, her strange quiet voice reaching out to the corners of the room.

“May she be the first of many,” replied the people in unison.

“We meet to welcome a fighter.”

“May the young fighter grow strong and increase the strength of the tribe.”

“We meet to welcome a woman-child.”

“May the woman-child be fertile, and in her turn, help to replenish the tribe.”

Tahneh lowered the pitch of her voice slightly. “We are an ancient people. The Kohn empire was the handiwork of our ancestors.”

“We are a new people,” said the many voices. “In each child we welcome, we are reborn.”

“There is a color for welcoming,” said Tahneh.

The people blazed luminescent white.

“And there is a color for life.”

The people glowed a swiftly uniform green—the green of healthy mountain vegetation washed clean by rain.

"And there is a color for strength and honor."

The people ceased to radiate light at all. They allowed their coloring to settle to normal. Now only Diut and Tahneh blazed forth in brilliant blues.

"We welcome the fighter child," said Tahneh. "May she have long life, strength, and honor." Tahneh looked at the two artisans. "May she have the care she will need while she is young."

Gehnahteh and Choh stood up. Diut and I also stood.

"A fighter child needs two mothers and two fathers to keep her safe," said Tahneh. "What man fathered this child?"

"I am her father," said Diut.

"And what woman gave birth?"

"I," I said simply.

"So. But you are fighters. And you must be free to defend the tribe. Are there others whom you would trust to care for your child?"

Diut answered for both of us. "We ask the artisans Gehnahteh and Choh to be parents to our child when we cannot."

Tahneh looked at the artisans. "Will you accept the fighter child?"

"She will be as one born to us," said Gehnahteh softly.

I stepped forward and placed Tien in Gehnahteh's arms.

Tahneh whitened. "The tribe is one greater now. We will feast and rejoice!"

Dawn.

The Verrick cabin had burned to the ground and was still smoldering. The storehouse had burned even more quickly, but its fire had spread. It was still spreading. The storehouse that had served as a prison for the Tehkohn captives had burned. Now several of the Missionaries' cabins were on fire. The settlement was full of smoke and ash. But only the buildings were burning. The people had gotten out with their possessions. That was all that mattered.

The Garkohn were scattered, painted, confused, beaten. Most of them had already fled back to their own dwelling. Tehkohn fighters hunted those who were still at the settlement. They found injured ones who had tried to hide, and snapped their necks perfunctorily. The Missionaries first stared, then turned away. It was a kind of killing that they pretended to be shocked at—though unlike Jules and Neila, many of them had advocated using it against wild humans on Earth. Alanna remembered if they did not.

Alanna stood with Diut, watching them prepare to leave. Near her, an old woman—Beatrice Stamp, her name was—and her two recently orphaned young grandchildren struggled to load a heavy sack onto a handcart. Between them, they could drag the sack well enough, but they could not lift it. Since no one else had noticed their trouble,

Alanna went to help. Burdened by neither too many years nor too few, Alanna lifted the sack and threw it into the cart. The old woman looked at Diut, then looked at Alanna as though she did not know whether to thank her or not.

Alanna went back to Diut's side staring at his grotesquely swollen arm. "You need care." She spoke in English. "When will you let a healer help you?" She had seen two judges who were healers at the settlement.

"When your Missionaries are on their way." He took a ragged breath and looked down at his misshapen arm. "Soon."

Alanna saw that the first Missionaries to be fully ready to leave were lining up at the gate with their handcarts. They looked like a miniature wagon train out of pre-Clayark Earth history. But this was a train that used people as draft animals and handcarts as covered wagons.

Jules moved along the lengthening line, checking the carts and the people, seeing that everyone had packed the essentials, seeing that the very young and the very old had help. Alanna saw him order a stocky adolescent boy to help Beatrice Stamp and her grandchildren pull their cart.

"I spoke to him while you were helping your mother to load her cart," said Diut. "Some of my fighters will guide him across the mountains and help him settle in the next valley."

"If only the Garkohn will leave them alone there."

"The Garkohn will leave everyone alone for a while. They have gaping wounds to tend. Two leaders dead…" He broke off suddenly. "Why did you kill Gehl?"

"She was trying to burn my parents' house—with all of us inside." No need to tell him why. That was over.

"I am glad she is dead. She was as ambitious as Natahk. Wehhano will be easier to deal with. And he will keep to the valley more." He changed the subject abruptly. "Your father asked me to send you with the Missionaries."

She looked at him silently.

"He said you belonged with your own people. He said I had no hold on you now that Tien was dead."

Alanna sighed and shook her head.

"I asked him if it was the Missionary way for a husband to send his wife away because their child had died."

"He has believed one way all his life," said Alanna. "It is hard for him to change."

"He is not trying to change. He is trying to find reasons not to change. Reasons that prove him right." There was harshness in his voice. It was not the first time Jules's stubbornness had angered him.

"He will be gone soon."

"So. And you must speak with him before he leaves."

"I know." Family. Among the Kohn, a kinsman was a kinsman no matter how foolishly he behaved. And Alanna found herself agreeing with them. Jules had chosen to make her his daughter, and after a time, she had chosen to accept him as her father. But she could not choose now to end the relationship. She would probably not see him again, but she would still think of him as her father, still love him. Diut was right. She had to try once more. But she did not move. She stood watching Jules, wanting to go to him, but not wanting to feel the weight of his condemning stare again. What kind of man was he that he could condemn her for saving both his life and the Mission, his reason for living? Then she saw Nathan James approaching. She made a sound of disgust. Jules's intolerance was hard enough to take. Jules she loved. She had never loved Nathan.

Nathan came up, stared at Diut's arm for a moment, then spoke in English. "I'd heard that you were hurt. I'm a healer, Tehkohn Hao. I can help you if you like."

Alanna was startled, but Diut did not know enough about Nathan to be startled. He was only curious.

"Why do you want to help?"

Nathan shrugged. "You have helped us. I admit that I didn't trust you at first, but you helped us."

"And you wish to repay?"

"Yes."

"There is no need. But it is good of you to offer." He was trying to say "thanks," Alanna realized. That was not something normally said aloud among the Kohn, and he was not accustomed to saying it even in English. Under other circumstances, he might have whitened to show gratitude, but now he was having enough trouble maintaining a steady blue in spite of his pain.

"What will you do then?" asked Nathan.

"When you have all gone, my healers will care for me."

"They…know how to do such things?"

"We are a mountain people, healer. We learned long ago to set and bind broken bones."

Nathan nodded doubtfully, looked once more at Diut's arm, then turned and walked away. He had been oddly careful not to look at Alanna.

"Go to your parents," said Diut. "Missionaries have already begun to leave. Go. Make your peace."

She nodded, but went first to Neila. The woman was standing alone staring at the smoldering ruins of her cabin. She spoke as Alanna came up beside her.

"It didn't take long to burn, did it?"

"No," said Alanna. "But then, a lot of solid-looking things can be destroyed quickly."

Neila glanced toward Jules. "Have you tried again?"

"I was about to. I will."

"Did Nathan offer to fix Diut's arm?"

"Yes. But I don't know why."

"He asked me about Diut…and you. I told him. I didn't think it made any difference now."

"It doesn't."

"He said he thought it was something like that. He said he didn't understand how you could do such a thing, but that it was your problem. He said he was grateful to the Tehkohn for saving the settlement no matter what…you had done."

Alanna laughed without humor. "I wonder how he manages to separate the two in his mind. He didn't say a word to me just now. He pretended I wasn't there."

"Lanna, go talk to your father."

"You should catch your wagon," said Alanna. "The Lorenz boy is halfway to the woods with it."

"Good-bye, Lanna."

"Good-bye." Oddly, neither of them seemed inclined to touch the other now. They gazed at each other for a long moment, then turned and left each other—Neila to catch her wagon, Alanna toward where Jules stood watching the wagons and people fall slowly into line.

He ignored her for several seconds, and she could feel his tenseness growing.

"What is it?" he asked finally.

"I came to say good-bye."

It was the first time she had ever been relieved to see a look of pain cross his face. It told her, at least, that she could still reach him. He did not hate her—yet.

"How can you have veered so far from all that we tried to teach you—wanting to stay here and never see one of your own kind again."

"Don't think I like seeing you go—except for your own sake, of course."

"You should be going with us."

"You know I can't."

"He would let you go if you made him understand that you belonged with your own people."

She managed a wry smile. "I doubt that. Anyway, I don't want to leave him."

"Then you are damned." There was a hollow sound to his voice. The pain on his face seemed to intensify. She knew him well enough

to realize that he was not just mouthing dogma as his followers sometimes did. He meant what he was saying. “You might be forgiven for what you were forced to do. But to consort voluntarily with a… a…”

“A human being,” she said. “You know how human they are.”

“Physically humanlike, perhaps. But spiritually…what god do they worship?”

“…none.”

“On Earth, even the most primitive of savages recognize some supreme being or beings, some power higher than themselves.”

“That might be true—on Earth.”

“Only animals were completely without spiritual beliefs.”

“On Earth!” And perhaps not even there. She wished she knew more Earth history. He might bend if she could show him that he was wrong in even one Earth instance.

He sighed. “It may even be that God set the Kohn here to test us, try our faith.”

She realized then that nothing she could say would alter his beliefs. She felt herself growing angry at his stubbornness, and she knew that she should leave him now, but she could not.

“Once you told the people they were wrong to condemn me for my differences,” she said. “Can you be so certain that you’re right to condemn the Kohn for theirs?”

“Their own history condemns them. They have never had spiritual beliefs. Never felt any part of themselves reach out to something greater. Perhaps that’s because like animals, they lack the part that would reach out. Perhaps they don’t have souls.”

And her anger seized her, ice cold. “That is foolishness. You know it is. Souls! When have you seen your own soul—that you’re so certain you have one? And for that matter, when have you seen your God?”

It was a mistake. She knew that before the words were out, but she had not been able to hold them back. She and Jules glared at each other in open hostility until she spoke again. “You know Diut is a man, as you are a man. Otherwise, how could I have borne his child?”

He hit her. He had never done such a thing before. He seemed surprised that he had done it now. She had not moved except as the blow moved her. She stood looking at him.

“Good-bye, Lanna.”

Her anger drained away and she looked at him sadly. “For a while, I was your daughter. Thank you for that anyway.”

He turned and walked away.

She stayed where she was, following him with her eyes until she could not see him past the unshed tears. A few moments later, Diut came over, looked at her, put his good arm around her, and led her

out of the gate and around to where most of his Tehkohn waited.